

University of Warwick institutional repository: <http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap>

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD at the University of Warwick**

<http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap/35234>

This thesis is made available online and is protected by original copyright.

Please scroll down to view the document itself.

Please refer to the repository record for this item for information to help you to cite it. Our policy information is available from the repository home page.

# **Melancholy in Hollywood Westerns, 1939-1962**

**Peter Falconer**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television Studies

University of Warwick

Department of Film and Television Studies

September 2010

## Contents

<u>List of Illustrations</u>	iv
<u>Acknowledgements</u>	vii
<u>Declaration</u>	x
<u>Abstract</u>	xi
<u>Introduction</u>	1
<u>Review of Literature</u>	13
<u>Introduction to Melancholy</u>	59
<u>Chapter 1: Violence</u>	81
<u>Colt .45 – Establishing the “Right” Relationship to the Gun</u>	82
<u>The Problem of Meaningful Violence</u>	93
<u>The Violent World</u>	97
<u>The Justifying Outrage</u>	108
<u>Violence, Genre and Tone</u>	119
<u>Picking up Guns</u>	123

<u>Monstrosity and Melancholy</u>	134
<u>Control and Honour</u>	141
<u>The Fair Fight</u>	147
 <u>Chapter 2: Western Towns at Night</u>	
	160
<u>The Implicit Standard of the Gunfight</u>	162
<u>The Shooting in the Night-time Town, version 1: <i>Pursued</i></u>	164
<u>The Shooting in the Night-time Town, version 2: <i>Rio Bravo</i></u>	170
<u>The Shooting in the Night-time Town, version 3: <i>The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance</i></u>	178
<u><i>Stagecoach</i> – a melancholy sense of possibility</u>	185
 <u>Chapter 3: Old Men</u>	
	196
<u>The Old Man and the Western Hero – background</u>	197
<u><i>Blood on the Moon</i> – a moment of role-reversal</u>	200
<u>Stasis and Place</u>	205
<u>The West as an Old Place</u>	212
<u>The Hero and the Old Man's World</u>	214
<u><i>Man of the West</i> – the World of the Evil Old Man</u>	220
<u>The Evil Old Man and the Western Hero</u>	223
<u><i>Ride the High Country</i> – Old Men, Heroism and Authenticity</u>	230
<u>Finding a Place where Old Men can be Heroes</u>	234

Chapter 4: Music

243

Westerns and Popular Music

243

Time and the Title Song

246

Disjunctions and Clashing Conventions

254

*Rancho Notorious* – the Lost World

259

Establishing a Relationship to the Past

263

The Irretrievable Past

269

*Johnny Guitar* – Asserting Control and Coherence

276

Intensity and Isolation

280

*River of No Return* – The Impracticality of Melancholy

284

Conclusion

297

Bibliography

304

Filmography

317

Illustrations

321

### List of Illustrations

- Fig. 1.1 – *Colt. 45*: the guns in their display case.
- Fig. 1.2 – *Colt. 45*: Brett's wanted poster.
- Fig. 1.3 – *The Gunfighter*: Jimmy Ringo shoots Eddie, while still holding his drink in his other hand.
- Fig. 1.4 – *Bend of the River*: Laura listening to the calls of the "night-birds".
- Fig. 1.5 – *Winchester '73*: Lola tells Lin that she understands what the last bullet is for.
- Fig. 1.6 – *Stagecoach*: Mrs Mallory praying, unaware of Hatfield's gun.
- Fig. 1.7 – *Winchester '73*: the scuffed stock of the recovered rifle.
- Fig. 1.8 – *Dodge City*: Harry playing at being "a pretty desperate character."
- Fig. 1.9 – *Dodge City*: a glimpse of the Sunday School picnic scene in an earlier montage.
- Fig. 1.10 – *The Return of Frank James*: revealing the gun.
- Fig. 1.11 – *Destry Rides Again*: Destry reacts to the death of Frenchy.
- Fig. 1.12 – *Destry Rides Again*: Destry listens to the children singing.
- Fig. 1.13 – *The Return of Frank James*: "Are you ready to meet your maker?" "I reckon so."
- Fig. 1.14 – *The Return of Frank James*: Frank looming over the stage.
- Fig. 1.15 – *Colt .45*: the oddly static two-shot.
- Fig. 1.16 – *Man With The Gun*: Nelly cradles the wounded Tollinger.
- Fig. 1.17 – *The Gunfighter*: the silhouetted rider in the final shot.
- Fig. 2.1 – *Pursued*: Jeb hiding in the stable.
- Fig. 2.2 – *Pursued*: Jeb, still in the shadows after shooting young Prentice.
- Fig. 2.3 – *Pursued*: Grant Callum points a gun at Jeb from the alley.
- Fig. 2.4 – *Pursued*: Jake Dingle's gun, revealed in the same shot to be pointed at Callum.
- Fig. 2.5 – *Rio Bravo*: Dude and Chance looking up the street at Wheeler.
- Fig. 2.6 – *Rio Bravo*: Wheeler coming down the street.
- Fig. 2.7 – *Rio Bravo*: Wheeler stepping into the sights of the hidden gunman.
- Fig. 2.8 – *Rio Bravo*: the hidden gunman up in the rafters of the saloon.
- Fig. 2.9 – *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* – Hallie in the kitchen doorway, watching Tom depart.

Fig. 2.10 – *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: Tom shoots Liberty Valance from across the street.

Fig. 2.11 – *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: Ranse peering in through the window of the newspaper office.

Fig. 2.12 – *Stagecoach*: “If there’s ever anything I can do for...”

Fig. 2.13 – *Stagecoach*: “I know.”

Fig. 2.14 – *Stagecoach*: Ringo and the Plummer brothers meet where the street narrows.

Fig. 2.15 – *Stagecoach*: Ringo dives forward and fires.

Fig. 3.1 – *Blood on the Moon*: Kris Barden in a gunfighter pose.

Fig. 3.2 – *Blood on the Moon* – Barden given an iconic outline in a rear-close-up.

Fig. 3.3 – *Blood on the Moon*: introducing Barden’s homestead.

Fig. 3.4 – *Blood on the Moon*: Barden reacts to the news of his son’s death.

Fig. 3.5 – *Yellow Sky*: the main street of the ghost town.

Fig. 3.6 – *Ride Lonesome*: the main characters in the ruined Dobe Corral.

Fig. 3.7 – *Yellow Sky*: Grandpa offers Stretch a drink.

Fig. 3.8 – *Blood on the Moon*: Barden’s house at the end of the movie.

Fig. 3.9 – *Yellow Sky*: Grandpa dozing in the saddle.

Fig. 3.10 – *Man of the West*: Dock Tobin presiding over the fight between Link and Coaley.

Fig. 3.11 – *Man of the West*: Dock up on the ledge, shouting down at Link.

Fig. 3.12 – *Man of the West*: Dock coming down from the mountain.

Fig. 3.13 – *Man of the West*: Link patting Billie on the hand.

Fig. 3.14 – *Man of the West*: Coaley holds a knife to Link’s throat while Dock dozes in the background.

Fig. 3.15 – *Ride the High Country*: Gil Westrum as “The Oregon Kid”.

Fig. 3.16 – *Ride the High Country*: Steve Judd in the wilderness.

Fig. 3.17 – *Ride the High Country*: Gil in the wilderness.

Fig. 3.18 – *Ride the High Country*: the face-off in the Knudsen farmyard.

Fig. 3.19 – *Ride the High Country*: Gil and Steve face the Hammonds.

Fig. 3.20 – *Ride the High Country*: Steve falls out of the frame in the final shot.

Fig. 4.1 – *High Noon*: Will and Amy Kane step forward to take their wedding vows.

Fig. 4.2 – *High Noon*: “No, I couldn’t get anybody.”

Fig. 4.3 – *High Noon*: the end of the crane shot.

Fig. 4.4 – *Wagon Master*: the river crossing.

Fig. 4.5 – *A Walk in the Sun*: the book as title card.

Fig. 4.6 – *Rancho Notorious*: Altar Keane singing, smoking and looking bored in a flashback.

Fig. 4.7 – *Rancho Notorious*: the face of an anonymous grizzled frontiersman.

Fig. 4.8 – *Johnny Guitar*: Vienna lighting the lamps.

Fig. 4.9 – *Rancho Notorious*: groups of older men sitting around doing nothing.

Fig. 4.10 – *Johnny Guitar*: Vienna’s fringed leather gloves, worn on the buggy ride with Johnny.

Fig. 4.11 – *River of No Return*: Matt Calder chopping down a tree in the opening shot.

Fig. 4.12 – *River of No Return*: Kay Weston closes her eyes as she sings.



## Acknowledgements

This project was funded by a Postgraduate Research Fellowship at Warwick University. I would first like to thank the University for providing this funding (and the teaching opportunities that came with it). I am also hugely grateful to Stella Bruzzi and Ed Gallafent for their instrumental roles in helping me secure the fellowship.

I would like to offer my sincere thanks to the friends and colleagues who provided more kinds of comfort, advice and practical assistance than I can list here:

Becky Allen, Hannah Andrews, José Arroyo, Rosie Atwood, Martin and Lucy Basford, Eve Bennett, Rose Biggin (who suggested that my title should be ‘This Frown Ain’t Big Enough For the Both of Us’), Alastair Binnie-Lubbock, Anne Birchall, Mair Bosworth, Matt Briant, Bobby Bridgeman, Kostya and Emmy Bristow, David Broster, Charlotte Brunsdon, Jon Burrows, Chris and John Carter, Heather Charlton, Oli Copp, Fiona Cox, Paul Cuff, Jon Curzon, Gordon Drummond, Greg Frame, Oliver Gruner, Malini Guha, Stephen Gundle, Heather Hares, Elly Harrowell, Linzi Harvey, Stuart Haynes, Stuart Henderson, Ben Hickman, Alex Jacoby, Claire Jenkins, Wujung Ju, Neon Kelly, Mikel Koven, Ritesh Krishna, Owen Lake, Milly Lewis, Dean Love, Sergio Lussana, John Lyons, Becky Mahay, Anne and Eugene Mainwaring, Catherine March, David McGowan, Aileen McKenna, Tracey McVey, Chris Meir, Hayley Merchant, Barbara Mitra, Rachel Moseley, Richard Murphy, Celia Nicholls, Claire Nicholson, Santiago Oyarzabal, Holly Parsons, Victor Perkins, Victoria Perks, Adam Phillips, Alastair Phillips, Roy Pierce-Jones, Michael Pigott, Nic Pillai, Lydia Plath, Martin Pumphrey, Doug Pye, Denise Quinn, Mike Riding, Hannah Samuel, Otto Saumarez Smith, Laura Sava, Tom Steward, Dan Stirrup, Natalie Stone, Sarah Thomas, Dan Thompson and Zoë Brigley Thompson, Claire Trévien, Tim Vermeulen, Tom Voce, Rick Wallace, Helen Wheatley, Fran and Paul White, Mark Willetts, Oliver Wilson and Louise Zborowski.

Particular thanks are also due to:

My students at the Universities of Warwick and Worcester, who weren't on the whole very keen on Westerns, but who were provocative, inspiring and lots of fun.

Anna Sloan and John Speller, for giving me the opportunity to look at Country and Western music from a performer's perspective and enjoy myself enormously in the process.

Catherine Constable and Tamar Jeffers McDonald, for taking a particular interest in my academic career and giving me the considerable benefit of their experience and nurturing generosity.

Jim MacDowell, for continuing to set the standard against which I measure my own work, and for saying some very kind things about some of my writing.

Tom Hughes, for being a friend, housemate and comedic partner who put up with my nonsense and generally set a good example.

My parents, Alex and Chris Falconer, my sister, Jennie Falconer, and her partner, Simon Hegarty, for providing so much support and encouragement, far beyond the obligations of family loyalty.

Christine, David and Rhys Lawton, for accepting me into their family in such a generous and hospitable fashion.

Over the period of a long piece of work, there are likely to be some losses and some gains. One loss I particularly want to acknowledge is that of my friend and former colleague Jason Simpkins, who died in January 2009 at the age of 25. He was a great cineaste, a Westerner (from the state of Colorado) and a unique and distinctive individual. His father Larry also died, almost exactly a year after him. I would like to remember them both here.

As for the gains, I am much happier to acknowledge the children born to close friends of mine during the writing of this thesis: Zakk White and Lyra Zborowski. Both already seem like splendid little people, and I look forward to seeing what they will become.

Finally, I would like to dedicate my thesis to three people, without whom it would have been more or less impossible:

Ed Gallafent, my supervisor, for his seemingly limitless patience, his consistent insight and his ability to conceive of different ways of looking at my work and fresh angles of approach.

James Zborowski, for his intellectual kinship and inspiration, his enthusiasm for movies, music and ideas and his unfailing kindness and friendship.

Bronwen Lawton, for being such a gracious and even-tempered last line of defence, and for her strength, encouragement, patience, support and love.

### Declaration

I declare that the material contained in this thesis is my own work, and that it has not been published, or submitted for a degree at another university.

## Abstract

This thesis uses the concept of melancholy to extend and develop the critical understanding of the Western genre. It focuses on the various ways in which Westerns made in Hollywood between 1939 and 1962 can be said to express melancholy. It proposes that, during the period in which Western movies were an important and popular part of mainstream film production, the conventions of the genre were familiar and well-developed enough to permit a wide range of sophisticated expressive possibilities. The complex and ambiguous associations attached to the notion of melancholy make it particularly suitable for demonstrating this.

The Review of Literature addresses the major perspectives through which Westerns have been conceived and understood within Film Studies, and assesses their relevance to the methodology employed in this thesis. It also considers some of the wider contexts that will be employed in the discussion of the genre and its conventions that will follow. The Introduction to Melancholy establishes a fuller cultural, historical and intellectual context for the particular focus of the thesis, and suggests some of its specific applications in relation to Westerns.

The main section of the thesis is divided into four chapters. Each of these examines a particular feature of the Western genre that can be used to express melancholy. Chapter 1 discusses the conventions that are employed to frame our understanding of violence in the genre. The melancholy implications of these conventions, and the problems that arise out of them, are considered in relation to a number of films from the period.

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with more specific and localised tropes which function as melancholy reflections of other aspects of the genre. Chapter 2 looks at the night-time town as an alternative melancholy space within the generic world of the West. Aspects of the previous chapter's discussion of violence are developed in this context, through the detailed analysis of the use of the

night-time town in *Pursued*, *Rio Bravo*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and *Stagecoach*.

Chapter 3 examines the figure of the old man as a melancholy counterpart to the Western hero. It demonstrates a long-standing connection between the two character types within the genre, and investigates how this connection is used to portray the hero in a melancholy light. The first half of the chapter examines the melancholy relationship between the hero and old men as supporting characters in *Blood on the Moon* and *Yellow Sky*. The second half develops some of the same issues further in relation to old men in more prominent roles in *Man of the West* and *Ride the High Country*.

Chapter 4 considers the use of music to express melancholy in Westerns. Its particular focus is the Western title song, and the period of the early 1950s when it came to prominence. More broadly, the chapter looks at the effects of combining styles and conventions from Western movies and popular music, and the ways in which this combination can produce melancholy. The films whose title songs are examined in detail are *High Noon*, *Rancho Notorious*, *Johnny Guitar* and *River of No Return*.

## Introduction

It all started with *Ride Lonesome* (Budd Boetticher, Columbia / Ranown, USA, 1959). I was trying, rather speculatively, to write about *Straw Dogs* (Sam Peckinpah, ABC Pictures, USA, 1971). I decided that in order to better understand what has been called “the most “Western” of all Peckinpah’s films not set in the Old West”<sup>1</sup>, I ought to deepen my familiarity with the Western genre. So I set about watching as many Westerns as I could. This undertaking quickly began to eclipse my thoughts about *Straw Dogs*, but it was not until I saw *Ride Lonesome* that I discovered the new focus for the work that I wanted to do.

What struck me most about *Ride Lonesome* was the impression that the movie gave, despite its sparse setting and small group of characters, of the fullness of its world, the larger context in which its action implicitly takes place. Almost as striking was how little explanation or illustration this wider world seemed to require, as if its existence could be unproblematically assumed. The dialogue of the film is full of passing allusions to Winchesters and Mescaleros, and place names like Bisbee, Rio Bravo and Dry Fork. These are treated unselfconsciously, as references to familiar things, the significance of which is entirely self-evident. There is, of course, nothing surprising about this. All I am describing here is the film’s use of the recognisable conventions of the Western genre – the pre-existing associations and points of reference accumulated over time from other Westerns. But, perhaps because of the starkness of the movie, its isolation of a few key elements in a minimal setting,

the importance of these conventions seemed all the more pronounced. They provided a background, against which the film's tight focus seemed less to exclude the wider world than to condense it. Jim Kitses describes Budd Boetticher's style as exhibiting "a natural classicism, a fascination with formal aspects of the drama and the terrain on which it is played out."<sup>2</sup> It is this that gives *Ride Lonesome* its power – its engagement with the Western as a particular form, as a framework for establishing how and why its individual components *matter*, and a context in which they can be understood.

For me, the experience of watching *Ride Lonesome* was characterised by a feeling of melancholy. This melancholy was primarily nostalgic in character, for a style and a period of filmmaking that I was born too late to have experienced, in which it was possible to make such a movie. Westerns have not formed a substantial part of Hollywood filmmaking for several decades. The knowledgeable mainstream audience, on which Westerns like *Ride Lonesome* depend, does not exist any more – a familiarity with the conventions of the genre is no longer something that filmmakers, even if they still wanted to make Westerns, can assume. Of course, Westerns are still made, but the possibilities for the genre in contemporary Hollywood are much more circumscribed. I reflected sadly on the loss of an extensive and developed vocabulary of cinematic expression.

Thrown into somewhat gloomy contemplation as I was, I started thinking more generally about Westerns from a melancholy perspective. I began to consider what else the genre might offer to such a perspective, other than a



generalised sense of its decline in status and profile. Might Westerns themselves contain expressions of melancholy? Might the conditions of the genre's popular heyday – the same conditions whose loss I was lamenting – not also have permitted this expression? Given the capacity of the genre to invest particular images and motifs with concentrated significance, this certainly seemed like a prospect worth exploring.

This, at bottom, is what this thesis is about: exploring the expressive possibilities of the Western genre in Hollywood during the period of its greatest success and popularity. My choice of melancholy as a focus is not just a whim – my aim is to extend and develop the understanding of what can be expressed within the conventions of the genre, and melancholy suits this purpose particularly well. The Western is an exemplary form of American popular culture – it is often considered to embody quintessentially American values and preoccupations. Melancholy, by contrast, is not a trait that is commonly associated with much of American culture. Edward Gallafent refers to it as “that quality which so many sides of American culture hate to acknowledge”<sup>3</sup>. Robert Warshow characterises the “social and political organisation” of the USA as “committed to a cheerful view of life”, and argues that the expression of unhappiness “implies a certain reprobation of [American] society”<sup>4</sup>. Thus, melancholy can be thought of as an unofficial or alternative viewpoint within American culture, a response to this apparent insistence on optimism. Warshow himself develops this point:

Even within the area of mass culture, there always exists a current of opposition, seeking to express by whatever means are available to it

that sense of desperation and inevitable failure which optimism itself helps to create.<sup>5</sup>

Warshow's reference to "whatever means are available" within popular culture points to the same possibility that I am investigating – the use of familiar forms to express an alternative perspective. A tacit assumption in a lot of critical writing on the Western genre is that its conventional tropes and structures, in their emphatic American-ness, are inherently affirmative. My focus on melancholy, then, partly functions as a way of opening up new interpretations of the genre, of suggesting different ways in which these conventions can operate.

Before I proceed much further, I should specify the parameters of my study. The Westerns that I discuss in this thesis were released between 1939 and 1962. I have chosen these years to bracket my examination of the genre because they have both been regarded as watershed points in its history. Peter Stanfield notes that "In 1939 all the major studios made a commitment to the production of prestige westerns"<sup>6</sup>. It needs to be acknowledged, of course, that Westerns had formed a significant part of Hollywood production since the silent era. J. Hoberman claims that they had represented a substantial proportion of Hollywood output since at least 1910<sup>7</sup>, and Stanfield stresses the importance of 1930s Westerns in establishing the conditions for the genre's future success<sup>8</sup>. 1939, however, was the year that the genre established a high and enduring mainstream profile – the year of *Stagecoach* (John Ford, Walter Wanger Productions, USA), *Dodge City* (Michael Curtiz, Warner Brothers, USA), *Jesse James* (Henry King, Twentieth Century-Fox,

USA) and *Union Pacific* (Cecil B. DeMille, Paramount, USA). 1962 is not quite as clear-cut a landmark, but it was the first year since before the coming of sound where fewer than 20 Westerns were produced<sup>9</sup>, and Hoberman identifies it as the point at which popular mainstream “confidence in the Western began to ebb”<sup>10</sup>. It was also the year of two important Westerns that take an explicitly retrospective view on their genre and its traditions: *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, Paramount, USA) and *Ride the High Country* (Sam Peckinpah, MGM, USA). In both movies, this retrospective quality relates to a sense that the generic and historical world they represent has already ended, or is rapidly coming to an end. As such, both movies have been suggested as end points for “the classical Western”<sup>11</sup>.

The critical use of the term “classical Western” in relation to these films points to another issue that I need to address concerning my chosen period. The 23 years in question have been extensively subdivided by critical accounts of the genre into different trends, cycles and sub-generic variants, of which the “classical Western” is an example. Whilst it is important that I acknowledge the changes and developments in the genre during this period of time, I do not intend to commit myself to grouping the films I discuss into any particular historical categories. I am not offering the period from 1939 to 1962 as a unified and coherent era of Westerns; I am simply using it as a broad indication of the time during which the genre’s position in the mainstream of American popular culture was at its height. I will acknowledge and address the specific historical context of the movies that I examine in this thesis, and in

my final chapter I will look more closely at a particular moment in Western movie production (the early 1950s).

I am also, however, concerned with the continuities between films from different parts of my chosen period – the shared conventions that they inflect in different ways. The combination of continuity and variation in this period is suggested by the lack of any general critical agreement on the boundaries of its proposed subdivisions. Accounts of when the significant changes and developments took place vary. For some critics, for example, the genre developed a darker, “psychological” variant after the Second World War<sup>12</sup>. Edward Buscombe, however, places this development earlier, during the war years themselves<sup>13</sup>, a time in which André Bazin claims the genre was “almost removed... from Hollywood’s repertoire.”<sup>14</sup> The discrepancies between different ways of dividing the genre’s history suggest the presence of ongoing and overlapping elements. Robin Wood acknowledges this when he argues that the “psychological western” (which he himself places in the 1950s) was less a “departure” from its “classical” predecessors than a “logical extension” of their themes<sup>15</sup>.

Although my analysis of the ways in which various Westerns express a quality of melancholy depends on the understanding that they draw on the conventions and traditions of their genre, this does not mean that I regard them as representative examples of the Western. My choice of movies does not constitute an implicit definition of the genre (if they did, I would effectively be arguing that all Westerns were melancholy, which is not a position that can

be reasonably defended). I offer no such definition in this thesis. As Kitses argues:

Attempts to define genres usually involve a futile erection of fences, attempts to designate the ins and the outs. Increasingly, the notion of genre as an extended family of shared tendencies and resemblances, although inevitably at the mercy of normative models, family law, as it were, seems attractive.<sup>16</sup>

My focus is not on the necessities of the genre but on its possibilities, the variety of different inflections and representations that it allows. Thus, the films I examine in detail are a diverse group that offers many different perspectives on the genre. A number of them are by *auteur* directors, both those commonly associated with Westerns, such as John Ford and Anthony Mann, and those less frequently connected to them, like Fritz Lang and Otto Preminger. However, the films were not selected on this basis. Rather, they were chosen because they embody particular possibilities for the expression of melancholy. I am not trying to establish a canon of melancholy Westerns. The presence of melancholy in a movie should not in itself be considered a criterion of value. Some of the films I examine express melancholy in an interesting and successful way; in others, it seems more like an inadvertent result of unresolved tensions or accidental ambiguities.

Just as I do not intend to employ a particular fixed definition of the Western genre, I also do not propose to define melancholy in any single set of terms. I will be better able to convey a sense of the range of styles and expressions that I am discussing if I retain a degree of flexibility in my central concepts. However, this does not mean that they will remain vague and unarticulated. I

will establish an extensive context for my understanding of them in the sections that follow this introduction. In my Review of Literature, I identify some of the main ways in which Westerns have been conceptualised and interpreted, and I attempt to situate my own methodology in relation to different critical perspectives on the genre. I also illustrate some of the other cultural contexts I will bring to bear on the genre's characteristic tropes and conventions. This is continued in my Introduction to Melancholy, in which I discuss the connotations and associations that the term has accumulated over time. In order to do this, I will situate the notion of melancholy in a number of its key historical and intellectual contexts, including literature, philosophy, art history and medical science. I will also illustrate some of the ways in which these various understandings of melancholy can be applied to aspects of the Western genre.

The main body of my thesis consists of four chapters, each of which is concerned with a particular aspect of the genre that has lent itself to melancholy representations. Chapter 1 deals with violence. In it, I look at the melancholy implications of some of the conventions that Westerns have employed to assert and specify the significance of particular violent acts. I demonstrate the ways in which Westerns' engagement with the problem of portraying these acts as justified and purposeful has resulted in melancholy representations of violence. I begin my detailed examination of the movies here because the portrayal of violence is an element that so many Westerns share. This enables me to start with a wide-ranging discussion of the genre involving a larger number of Westerns than I analyse in the subsequent

chapters. These range across my chosen period, from *Dodge City* and *Destry Rides Again* (George Marshall, Universal, USA, 1939) to *Man With The Gun* (Richard Wilson, Formosa Productions, USA, 1955). The discursive breadth that the topic of violence permits is also useful for introducing a number of issues that will be taken up in the chapters that follow.

One of these issues relates to the conventions that govern the presentation of certain forms and styles of violence as fair and honourable. In Chapter 2, I relate these conventions to a distinctive recurring setting used in many Westerns: the night-time town. Chapters 2 and 3 form a complementary pair. Both deal with specific motifs – towns at night and old men – that can be thought of as melancholy counterparts to familiar aspects of the genre. In Chapter 2, I consider the night-time town as an alternative, more pessimistic space within the characteristic setting of the West. The bulk of the chapter is concerned with variations on the same moment in three movies: *Pursued* (Raoul Walsh, United States Pictures / Warner Brothers, USA, 1947), *Rio Bravo* (Howard Hawks, Armada Productions / Warner Brothers, USA, 1959) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. In each of these Westerns, the setting of the night-time town is used to establish a melancholy context for a scene in which a character is shot, and to portray the use of violence in a complex and problematic fashion. I conclude the chapter by using *Stagecoach* to provide a wider illustration of the sense of restricted possibility implied in the night-time town, especially in contrast to other parts of the world offered to us in Westerns.

In Chapter 3, I explore the connection between the stock figure of the old man, as used in a large number of Westerns, and the iconic Western hero. I develop the idea of the old man as a melancholy double to the hero, as representing – like the night-time town – a more limited and less hopeful set of possibilities in relation to him. I start by establishing the common background that the two figures share – the contexts that inform our understanding of the representation of them both. I then examine the relationship between the hero and the old man as a supporting character in two Westerns from the same year: *Blood on the Moon* (Robert Wise, RKO, USA, 1948) and *Yellow Sky* (William Wellman, Twentieth Century-Fox, USA, 1948). I consider the ways that these movies use this relationship to reflect on the hero in a melancholy fashion. Finally, I extend my conception of the old man as the hero's melancholy double into a discussion of old men in more featured roles in two Westerns from towards the end of my period. I investigate the melancholy effects of the use of an old man as a villain in *Man of the West* (Anthony Mann, Ashton Productions, USA, 1958) and of two old men as heroes in *Ride the High Country*.

Chapter 4 completes my main discussion of the Western genre by combining aspects of my approaches from the previous chapters. This final chapter is about the role of music in the expression of melancholy in Westerns. I continue to develop my concern with specific tropes and motifs by examining the use of title songs. This enables me to place my analysis in the context of a particular historical moment: the popular emergence of Western theme songs in the early 1950s. The focus of the chapter also permits me to return



to a wider view of the genre, and to consider how its conventions relate to and depart from the conventions of popular music employed in the songs. The movies whose title songs I will be discussing in this chapter are *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, Stanley Kramer Productions, USA, 1952), *Rancho Notorious* (Fritz Lang, Fidelity Pictures, USA, 1952), *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, Republic Pictures, USA, 1954) and *River of No Return* (Otto Preminger, Twentieth Century-Fox, USA, 1954). They represent a diverse array of melancholy expressions, which allows me to retain a sense of the variety that the conventions of the genre permit, even within a quite specific set of circumstances.

This sense of variety is one of the advantages that a focus on melancholy provides. It is a complex and ambiguous mood that can mean very different things in different contexts. I hope that by thinking about Westerns in relation to melancholy, I can do justice to the range of perspectives that the genre was able to accommodate at the height of its popularity.

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Bliss, *Justified Lives: Morality and Narrative in the Films of Sam Peckinpah* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, Sam Peckinpah: studies of Authorship within the Western* (London: BFI / Thames and Hudson, 1969) p. 111. N.B. I will hereafter refer to the 1969 edition of the book as *Horizons West*. The revised 2004 edition will be referred to by its fuller title, *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood*, to avoid confusion.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Gallafent, *Quentin Tarantino* (Harlow: Pearson, 2006), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Warshow, 'The Gangster as Tragic Hero', originally published 1948, version cited in Robert Warshow, *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre and other aspects of Popular Culture*, originally published 1962, version cited (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

---

<sup>6</sup> Peter Stanfield, *Horse Opera: The Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy* (Urbana / Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> J. Hoberman, 'How the Western Was Lost', originally published 1991, version cited in Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman (eds.), *The Western Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), p. 90.

<sup>8</sup> See Stanfield, *Horse Opera*, pp. 149-154 and Peter Stanfield, 'Country music and the 1939 Western: from Hillbillies to Cowboys', in Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of The Western* (London: Studio Vista, 1996), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> See Edward Buscombe, 'Appendix I: Charts and Tables' in Edward Buscombe (ed.), *The BFI Companion to the Western* (London: BFI, 1993), p. 426.

<sup>10</sup> Hoberman, 'How the Western Was Lost', p. 86.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Robin Wood, 'Man(n) of the West(ern)', *CineAction* 46 (June 1998), p. 27 and Jim Kitses, 'Introduction: Post-modernism and The Western', in Kitses and Rickman (eds.) *The Western Reader*, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), p. 334, p. 379.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Buscombe, 'The Western: A Short History', in Buscombe (ed.), *The BFI Companion to the Western*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>14</sup> André Bazin, 'The Evolution of the Western', originally published 1955, version cited in André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume 2*, translated by Hugh Gray (Berkeley / Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), p. 150.

<sup>15</sup> Wood, 'Man(n) of the West(ern)', p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> Jim Kitses, 'Introduction: Post-modernism and The Western', p. 19.

### Review of Literature

There is a vast amount of critical writing on the Western genre. Michael Coyne, in an observation that gives his book on Westerns its title, likens the field of enquiry to “a crowded prairie”<sup>1</sup>. This image is apt for a number of reasons. It suggests that much of the work on Westerns lays claim to similar or overlapping territory. As will become apparent, many of the main terms in which Westerns have been critically understood were set some time ago and have persisted with only minor modifications.

Coyne’s metaphor also implies a contemporary, and therefore retrospective, viewpoint – a crowded prairie is something that occurs after the wilderness has been tamed and populated. The same can be said of Western criticism, which came to prominence at the end of the genre’s mainstream heyday, and has continued to proliferate even as the popularity and profile of Western movies have diminished. As Jack Nachbar puts it, “...as Westerns have waned, critical studies of Westerns have waxed. Boy, have they waxed.”<sup>2</sup> The implications of this divergence, and the critical approaches that it favours, need to be examined. I will begin, then, with an analysis of some of the main areas of focus and emphasis that have structured discussions of the Western genre. As well as assessing the usefulness and relevance of these approaches to my own research, I will consider the impact that the genre’s commercial decline has had on the ways it has been critically conceptualised. Later, I will introduce some other critical and cultural contexts from outside the main body of work on Westerns that will inform my methodology.

Most of the major strands that constitute Western criticism are present in Jim Kitses' seminal discussion of the genre at the start of *Horizons West*. These strands, in order of appearance in Kitses' introduction, are generic form, history and myth. Kitses divides his own argument differently, into the categories "History", "Themes", "Archetype" and "Icons"<sup>3</sup>, which pertain respectively to settings, subjects, structures and details. This difference should be noted primarily because in Kitses' account the strands I identify overlap with one another significantly. However, in the four decades of Western criticism that have followed, these strands, whilst still interacting, have been developed along separate lines.

Kitses proposes the study of genre as a companion to auteur theory<sup>4</sup>, a means of situating a director-centred approach within a wider array of cultural considerations. At the time when *Horizons West* was first published, focusing on authorship was the main available way of taking popular films seriously. Kitses suggests that genre can function as another legitimising factor, stating that he aims to "advance the idea of an American *tradition*, of which the western seems to me an admirable and central model."<sup>5</sup> It is important to remember this overall project when examining the kinds of rhetoric and levels of interpretation that Kitses uses in relation to the Western genre. The scale implied in remarks like that quoted above and others such as, "What we are dealing with, of course, is no less than a national world-view"<sup>6</sup> is inextricably bound up in Kitses' attempts to demonstrate the cultural significance of Hollywood Westerns.

This, of course, is an admirable aim, and one that Kitses is largely successful in achieving, but it must also be considered in its historical context. The opening sentence of *Horizons West* is, “The most popular and enduring of Hollywood forms, the western has yet received scant critical attention.”<sup>7</sup> Comparing this remark with Nachbar’s quoted above reveals two contrasting critical contexts. In 1969 Westerns were still popular (Hoberman suggests that 1973 was the first year in which the extent of the genre’s decline was really felt<sup>8</sup>). By 2003 these terms are reversed – the popularity of the genre had not endured, but the growth in critical attention continued to persist. The significant early work on Westerns took place at a time when the genre was still big, and there was little reason to suppose that it this would cease to be the case. Kitses, and others such as Cawelti and Wright whom I shall come to shortly, had the contemporary popularity of Westerns at their rhetorical disposal, and used this to advance claims of the significance of the genre to wider considerations of American culture and society. Whilst this position is no longer available to critics without the qualifier “at the time” and the problematic implications it brings with it, Westerns have continued to attract interpretations on the grand scale established by aspects of these early accounts.

Kitses’ account continually returns to the figure of the individual author (indeed, the bulk of the book consists of in-depth analyses of the Western films of directors Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher and Sam Peckinpah). He argues that attention to the use of generic conventions allows us to bring a

wider cultural understanding to an analysis of films that is still basically auteur-centred:

Rather than an empty vessel breathed into by the film-maker, the genre is a vital structure through which flow a myriad of themes and concepts. As such the form can provide a director with a range of possible connections and the space in which to experiment, to shape and refine the kind of effects and meanings he is working towards.<sup>9</sup>

Authorship is Kitses' means of returning from the general to the particular, to the details of the individual film text. This is evident in his remarks about iconography, which move from a consideration of the overall significance of repeated elements, to their contrasting use by Ford, Boetticher, Mann and Peckinpah<sup>10</sup>.

Other early studies of Westerns which focus on generic form are less concerned with this level of local detail. Both John Cawelti's *The Six-Gun Mystique* and Will Wright's *Six Guns and Society* are more concerned with the underlying structures of the Western genre. Cawelti divides his attention between iconography and narrative structure, whilst Wright concentrates on the latter. Their central terms – “formula” for Cawelti and “myth” for Wright<sup>11</sup> – are different, but they advance two versions of the same argument – that the genericity of the Western, its repetition of certain structures, situations and tropes, relates significantly to American culture and society. Both writers justify this position in terms of the popularity of the genre. Wright, who restricts his analysis to the movies “that have been included in the industry list of the top money-makers of the year”<sup>12</sup>, argues that “successful Westerns are determined not solely by stars and advertising but, to a large degree, by the

presence of the expected social symbolism.”<sup>13</sup> From this point of view, audiences went to see Westerns because the defining characteristics of the genre addressed certain social and psychological needs. If we accept this proposition, then, it follows that to understand Westerns and what they reveal about American culture we should direct our attention to the elements shared by a large number of movies:

...the culturally significant phenomenon is not the individual work, but the formula or recipe by which more or less anonymous producers turn out individual novels or films. The individual works are ephemeral, but the formula lingers on, evolving and changing with time, yet still basically recognisable.<sup>14</sup>

This impulse leads Cawelti and Wright to attempt to define what Westerns are in order to determine what they do. Cawelti asserts that,

A Western that does not take place in the West, near the frontier, at a point in history when social order and anarchy are in tension, and that does not involve some sort of pursuit, is simply not a Western.<sup>15</sup>

Wright identifies four basic narrative structures that popular Westerns conform to at different points in their history, from the “classical plot” favoured in the 1930s and 1940s, via the “vengeance variation” and “transition theme” which are both prominent in the 1950s, to the “professional plot”, which emerges in the late 1950s and is particularly prevalent in the 1960s<sup>16</sup>. Both writers define the function of the forms that they observe in social terms. Cawelti argues that “the dialectic of resolution... [is] the essential ritual structure of the Western” and that therefore, in its narrative resolutions, “the Western affirms the necessity of society”<sup>17</sup>. Wright links his four structures to “the conceptual needs of social and self understanding required by the dominant social

institutions of that period”<sup>18</sup> and suggests that they should be interpreted as “conceptual models of social action for everyday life.”<sup>19</sup> This is to say, the plots negotiate and exemplify the forms of behaviour which are most successful or appropriate in their contemporary social (and particularly economic<sup>20</sup>) context.

This privileged connection between the structural and the social is entirely understandable, inasmuch as both writers take the genre’s mass popularity as their starting point. And this in itself is compelling enough. There seems little point in arguing against the idea that a particularly popular movie genre might tell us something about the society in which it exists. This alone, however, is no guarantee that the forms of the Western relate to American society and culture in any consistent way. Furthermore, the diversity of the genre needs to be taken into account. In his account of critical conceptions of the Western and how they relate to the wider understanding of Hollywood genres, Steve Neale reminds us that the genre has always consisted of “specific and diverse cycles and trends”<sup>21</sup> which involve variations more minute than the series of broad historical shifts noted by Wright. These cycles were often targeted at particular sections of the mass audience, such as women or moviegoers in a particular geographical region<sup>22</sup>. This means that they may have crept under the radar of critics concerned with the Western as a large-scale social phenomenon, but it does not mean that they have not made a cumulatively large contribution to the genre. The variety possible within Westerns can also be regarded as contributing to their (former) mass appeal, not to mention their aesthetic value. Michael Coyne argues that, “The key to the Western’s



durability was its very tractability.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Jim Kitses states that “Only a pluralist vision makes sense of our experience of the genre and begins to explain its amazing vigour and adaptability”<sup>24</sup>. This adaptability extends to its capacity to reflect various social concerns. Taking particular issue with Wright, Tag Gallagher suggests that the relationship between Western movies and US society is often present less in its deepest structures than on a much more specific and localised level. Gallagher offers as evidence the pragmatic, even mercenary, attitude to topical concerns taken by Westerns in the silent era:

Anything novel was instantly seized upon and copied voraciously... Any news event or fashion trend – labour actions, bloomers, Apaches, prohibition, female suffrage, Balkan crises, and a myriad of forgotten crises of the day – were zealously incorporated not only into westerns but into whatever other genres were currently popular, the western hero and the nature of his struggles altering accordingly.<sup>25</sup>

Neale stresses the heterogeneity of Westerns in the context of a much larger examination of the role of genre in Hollywood production. In relation to the Western genre, Neale emphasises “both the problematic consequences of the western’s centrality to accounts of genre and Hollywood and the problematic aspects of conventional accounts of the western itself.”<sup>26</sup> Since, as we have seen with Kitses, Cawelti and Wright, many key early accounts of genre were focused on Westerns, Neale argues that the peculiarities of the Western imposed a set of not always appropriate or applicable terms on the study of genre:

...many of its putative characteristics are unusual rather than typical, specific to westerns rather than characteristic of Hollywood’s genres as a whole. This is especially true of its visual conventions, of its relationship to US history and US culture, and hence of its susceptibility

to various methods of formal, cultural, ideological and thematic analysis.<sup>27</sup>

What is unusual, according to Neale, about the visual conventions of Westerns, is the particular prominence of iconography<sup>28</sup>. This, and the genre's apparent capacity to attract socio-historical interpretations, led Neale to the conclusion that the Western "is hardly a suitable model for general conceptions and theories of genre."<sup>29</sup> It is interesting to note at this stage that Neale seems to assume that the second of these characteristics is as obvious as the first, taking as read that the genre has a somehow privileged "relationship to US history and US culture". This, as is evident in my discussion of Cawelti and Wright, is the underlying assumption behind a large amount of Western criticism, and one which will also have to be examined shortly in relation to history. First, though, it is worth considering the methodological implications of iconography.

Neale's assertion, that the importance of iconography in the Western makes it difficult to apply a Western-derived conception of generic form to other genres, relates specifically to issues of definition. If what we require of iconography is that it should define a genre outright, then it fails in most instances, and is certainly inadequate when it comes to conceiving genre as a whole. It is worth observing, however, that in the example Kitses gives when introducing iconography into his definition of the Western genre, the iconographic element is not something that has to be present for the film to be a Western:

To see a church in a movie – any film but a western – is to see a church; the camera records. By working carefully for it a film-maker can give that church meaning, through visual emphasis, context, repetitions, dialogue. But a church in a western has *a priori* a potential expressiveness rooted in the accretions of the past.<sup>30</sup>

Kitses overstates this point somewhat – it is easy to conceive of a large number of other generic contexts in which we might understand a church to have certain pre-existing resonances. Significantly, though, his choice of icon is not a Stetson, a six-gun or a saloon, objects that we might expect to find in the overwhelming majority of Westerns. Rather, Kitses is interested in demonstrating *how* a church can become iconic through its repeated use in *some* Westerns. If we separate iconography from attempts to define generic essence, it becomes a much more useful and dynamic concept. This is an important part of my own methodology.

In this respect, my approach owes something to the brief section of Stanley Cavell's *The World Viewed* that deals with the iconographic categories relating to art and modernity from Baudelaire's 'The Painter of Modern Life'. In these, Cavell finds "stores of cinematic obsession" and proceeds to argue that,

"Film returns to us and extends our first fascination with objects, with their inner and fixed lives; and it studies what is done in and with them, which Baudelaire also mentions."<sup>31</sup>

Cavell's subsequent discussion starts with objects and clothing and proceeds to stars and character types – I will return to the figure of "The Dandy", as discussed by both Cavell and Baudelaire, in the next section of this thesis. None of the elements that Cavell examines here are exclusive to any

particular genre, but all are iconic by virtue of their repetition and familiarity. One of the felicities of classical Hollywood cinema, with which Cavell is largely concerned, is its varied deployment and inflection of often quite specific conventions. The work that exists on Western iconography usually deals with those features which are regarded as near-definitive: landscape, costume, guns, etc<sup>32</sup>. One of my aims in this thesis is to examine other tropes and motifs which, whilst we would not think of using them to define the genre itself, still draw significance from their repeated use in Westerns. This is not without precedent – Philip French, for example, considers poker in Westerns alongside a number of other, more familiar iconic elements<sup>33</sup> – but in a genre that frames its icons with particular starkness, much of this potential has yet to be explored. In Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis I look in detail at two such tropes: the night-time town and the old man. Neither of these is integral to our understanding of the genre as a whole, but both have acquired specific resonances and associations in Westerns. Furthermore, they relate in a complex and interesting fashion to more central aspects of the genre, such as the figure of the Western hero. By considering the ways in which melancholy is expressed through these tropes I can also examine how the wider conventions and traditions of the Western genre enable this expression.

The second of the trends in the criticism of Westerns anticipated by Kitses is history. Early in *Horizons West*, Kitses asserts with apparent boldness that, “First of all, the western is American history.”<sup>34</sup> In context, this is actually quite a modest claim. All Kitses is doing is pointing out the genre’s basis in real history: “American frontier life provides the milieu and the *mores* of the

western, its wild bunch of cowboys, its straggling towns and mountain scenery.”<sup>35</sup> However, as I have already noted, part of Kitses’ project is to stress the legitimacy of Western movies as an artform. As a rhetorical device, then, this claim is clearly used to imply a level of social and cultural significance; because the Western situates itself in American history, all the more localised meanings that it carries resonate in this broader context.

Typically though, Kitses qualifies and contextualises his use of history by placing it in tension with “archetype”<sup>36</sup>, by which he refers to the genre’s “complex inheritance”<sup>37</sup> of themes, characters and conventions from various literary, filmic and other cultural sources. This dynamic, he argues, is the source of the genre’s variety and adaptability:

The model we must hold before us is of a varied and flexible structure, a thematically fertile and ambiguous world of historical material shot through with archetypal elements which are themselves ever in flux.<sup>38</sup>

He then goes on to list the kinds of sub-generic variants that emerge from the dominance of one side or the other:

History provides a source of epics, spectacle and action films, pictures sympathetic to the Indian, ‘realistic’ films, even anti-westerns (Delmer Daves’ *Cowboy*). From the archetypal base flow revenge films, fables, tragedies, pastorals and a juvenile stream of product. But of course the dialectic is always at work and the elements are never pure.<sup>39</sup>

Robin Wood makes a similar point in his 1968 book on Howard Hawks. Comparing Hawks with Ford, Wood discusses the various options open to the Western filmmaker:

The genre gives great scope for a director with a feeling for America's past, for the borderline of history and myth, the early stages of civilisation, primitive, precarious and touching. But the genre also offers a collection of convenient conventions which allow the director to escape from the trammels of contemporary surface reality and the demand for verisimilitude, and express certain fundamental human urges or explore themes personal to him. If the classic Westerns of John Ford, with their loving and nostalgic evocation of the past, are the supreme examples of the first kind, *Rio Bravo* is the supreme example of the second.<sup>40</sup>

This passage is worth quoting, both as another reminder of the basis of early Western studies in auteur theory, and because of the connection Wood makes between history and the films of John Ford. Ford is the most highly praised and widely examined of Western directors, and also the one whose movies pay the most sustained attention to social and historical concerns. As a consequence, critics whose interest also lies with these matters have sometimes seemed to use Ford's work as a model for the whole genre, and treated other Westerns as if they conformed to his characteristic themes and preoccupations.

Since the 1970s, a large amount of work has emerged that seeks to draw parallels between the content of Western films and the social and political history of the time in which they were made. This has become one of the major trends in Western criticism. Michael Coyne suggests that "the political / allegorical school of Western analysis", to which he is a self-confessed adherent, "hit its stride" in the early 1970s with Philip French<sup>41</sup>. Interestingly, this critical approach came to prominence almost exactly as the genre's fading popularity was starting to become apparent. This, I would argue, is no

coincidence, but before I suggest why, it would be useful to look at some of the comparisons and conclusions that this approach has produced.

French acknowledges the heterogeneous influences and varied forms of the Western genre, but argues that these are united by the underlying theme of history:

The western is a great grab-bag, a hungry cuckoo of a genre, a voracious bastard of a form, open equally to visionaries and opportunists, ready to seize anything that's in the air from juvenile delinquency to ecology. Yet despite this, or in some way because of it, one of the things the western is always about is America rewriting and reinterpreting her own past, however honestly or dishonestly this may be done.<sup>42</sup>

The past, according to French, is rewritten in the terms of the political present. Thus, he divides 1950s and 1960s Westerns into four categories which connect “the style, tone and content of movies” to “the rhetoric, beliefs and public personae of four prominent politicians”<sup>43</sup>: John F. Kennedy, Barry Goldwater, Lyndon Johnson and William Buckley<sup>44</sup>. French posits no direct link between the movies and the politicians, but rather uses them to exemplify prevalent political attitudes of the time. Whilst this is an interesting exercise, it fails at the level of the individual movie. As with Will Wright, his categories seem plausible when he presents us with lists of film titles, but when he lingers on a particular text for a moment his taxonomy seems more questionable. French calls *Ride the High Country* “a Kennedy Western in which a pair of ageing marshals realise that their world is coming to an end and prepare two youngsters for a transformed society.”<sup>45</sup> French describes the Kennedy Western in these terms: “its mood would be cool with an

underlying note of the absurd or tragic sense of life; the past would be rendered in a moderately realistic fashion, almost without regret, just a token elegiacism” and “the underlying argument would favour a wry optimism about the future development of society.”<sup>46</sup> Applying these criteria to *Ride the High Country*, we can see that some of them fit to some extent (although it is not the film’s dominant mood, there is certainly some evidence of “wry optimism” in the movie) but that many of them do not. The film’s elegiac elements are considerably more than “token”, it acknowledges the significant presence of regret and it portrays the future with considerable ambivalence.

Despite citing him as a predecessor, Coyne is not uncritical of French’s approach, calling his four politicians “a limited, disparate and ultimately ephemeral assemblage”<sup>47</sup>. Coyne’s allegorical reading of the genre takes in a much broader range of historical trends, events and figures, and is thus more versatile in its application to different Western movies. Nonetheless, Coyne’s account still sometimes falls prey to the same kind of abstraction as French. During an otherwise fair and sensitive examination of three Westerns from the late 1940s (including, significantly, two by Ford) Coyne draws an explicit parallel between the situation faced by the United States Cavalry at the start of *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon* (John Ford, Argosy Pictures, USA, 1949) and the geopolitical developments of the early Cold War<sup>48</sup>. This may or may not be a productive comparison, but the only proof of its relevance that Coyne offers us is that *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* was released in 1949. We cannot assume a connection based on this fact alone, and even if we could, it still would not explain why this particular movie was employed to express these



contemporary concerns in this particular way. As Cavell argues in relation to the “folk wisdom” that the 1930s “comedies of remarriage” he examines should be understood as “fairy tales for the Depression”<sup>49</sup>, “that explanation does not specifically account for the form in question.”<sup>50</sup>

Reading Western films in the context of their contemporary history can be illuminating on a more localised basis. Scott Simmon, whose book, *The Invention of the Western Film*, engages with history on a number of different levels, reads *Yellow Sky* and *Devil's Doorway* (Anthony Mann, MGM, USA, 1950) in relation to the social reintegration of veterans after the Second World War<sup>51</sup>. He connects this interpretation to the films' engagement with themes and styles more commonly associated with *film noir*. The male group in *Yellow Sky*, galvanised and brutalised in equal measure by their experiences in the Civil War, have to face “the conflicts that come with their entrance into community, with greed over newfound prosperity, and with women – and thus with everything associated with noir.”<sup>52</sup> He links the two Westerns to other movies from the period, both *noir* and otherwise, which explicitly deal with returning veterans, such as *Crossfire* (Edward Dmytryk, RKO, USA, 1947) and *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, The Samuel Goldwyn Company, USA, 1946). This way, Simmon is able to evoke a plausible context for this particular connection between socio-political concerns and cycles of film production.

Frequently, though, this sort of interpretation tends towards generality. Arguing that 1950s Westerns took on new levels of complexity and

seriousness, Stephen McVeigh suggests that the genre's claims to these attributes at that time are underwritten by the context of the Cold War:

Thus the Western reached the 1950s in a contradictory manner, both traditionally mythic and moodily introspective. Against this troubled and sometimes contradictory backdrop, Hollywood fashioned many of its finest Westerns. And it is the Cold War that guarantees the genre's political immediacy and sense of purpose.<sup>53</sup>

Shortly after this, McVeigh presents a reading of *The Gunfighter* (Henry King, Twentieth Century-Fox, USA, 1950) and *High Noon* in relation to Atomic Age perceptions of time and the threat of nuclear annihilation. In this interpretation, the two films' foregrounding of time, through the prominent use of clocks and their relation to narrative deadlines, functions as:

...an indication of the vaguely, but intuitively understood connection that existed between the "new" version of time and the atomic bomb. Time is now a sinister relation to immense violence, rather than the orderly construct it was perceived to be before Einstein pulled the rug away. The countdowns depicted in both films are not neutral; time is not to be trusted. Time brings violence, confrontation and death once the clock reaches twelve.<sup>54</sup>

This is an interesting interpretation, which draws attention to an important characteristic shared by the two films. However, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that McVeigh has started from the notion that Cold War concerns are inherently central to both movies, and proceeded to tailor his argument to the historical material that seems to fit it best. It would be very unfair to suggest that there is no place for historical and allegorical interpretations in Western criticism, but their prevalence threatens to perpetuate a number of dangerous assumptions about the genre.

Many of these are exemplified in Stanley Corkin's *Cowboys as Cold Warriors*. Corkin treats Westerns almost as if they were propaganda, suggesting that the genre,

...was well suited to convey important ideological rationales for postwar US foreign policy, including the inevitability of US expansion and the strategies for hegemony that guided the Truman administration's foreign policy in the years immediately following World War II.<sup>55</sup>

Here, the impulse to read Westerns as reflecting the politics of their time leads to the assumption that the relationship between the two is unproblematic and thus that the genre directly serves and disseminates the dominant ideology. Westerns, according to Corkin, "helped to develop a national consensus"<sup>56</sup>. He links this function explicitly to their real basis in US history, and goes as far as suggesting that this makes the genre so inherently reactionary that it is likely to defeat any attempt to express an alternative viewpoint in a Western movie:

Arguably, by employing the Western as a vehicle for potentially critical social ideas, writers and directors allowed their films to be readily recontained by dominant conservative ideologies. That is, since Westerns, as a matter of their generic markers, refer to a triumphal moment of continental conquest, films – such as *High Noon* – that employ the genre to offer a political critique from the Left run the risk of having audiences apprehend the film's political content in a way that contradicts the filmmakers' intention.<sup>57</sup>

This is a rather bleak reversal of the *politique des auteurs*, in which the restrictions of the system overcome the individual filmmakers (rather than the other way around). This sort of monolithic conception of the genre is not a necessary corollary of the assumption that Westerns function as historical allegories, but it is served by this view.

There are several reasons why allegorical readings of Westerns have been so widespread. One likely factor is the frequency with which Western references and imagery have been used in the rhetoric of American politics. Richard Slotkin, Stephen McVeigh and others have pointed to numerous examples of US politicians representing themselves and their policies in frontier terms<sup>58</sup>. Both writers also stress the extent to which early examples of popular Western mythology were conceived for political ends. McVeigh, for example, asserts that,

The mythology of the West which emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century did not appear organically or naturally. Rather the mythology was deliberately constructed to serve a purpose, and it was constructed by a small group of interconnected men, among them Theodore Roosevelt, Frederick Jackson Turner, William F. Cody, Frederick Remington and Owen Wister.<sup>59</sup>

Western iconography has been adduced for a wide array of promotional purposes, from presidents to cigarettes. As I have already argued, a number of critics have (rightly) stressed the versatility of the genre and its capacity to incorporate different themes and concerns. As such, the Old West is an easy rhetorical option for advertising executives and political speechwriters alike. Consider one of Slotkin's examples, dealing with the use of Western imagery by US presidents from Kennedy to Reagan:

...the provenance and utility of the Frontier symbol did not end with the Kennedy / Johnson administrations: twenty years after Kennedy's acceptance speech the same symbolism – expressed in talismanic evocations of the images of movie-cowboys John Wayne and Clint Eastwood – would serve the successful campaigns of a Republican arch-conservative and former Hollywood actor identified (perhaps unfairly) with Western roles.<sup>60</sup>

Whilst comparisons between the presidents can undoubtedly be drawn, it is a sufficient demonstration of the flexibility of the symbols of the West that they can be used to help elect a Democrat in the 1960s and a Republican in the 1980s. This flexibility also applies to the ways in which Western images and themes can be interpreted. A variety of plausible-sounding historical and political inferences can be drawn from Western images and themes just as easily as they can be attached to them.

Alongside this, I would argue that the rise of allegorical readings of Westerns is closely connected to the genre's popular decline. Whilst discussing the importance of history to the study of film and the various ways it can enrich film analysis, Tom Gunning warns against letting a retrospective viewpoint reduce movies to exemplars of their times:

Our sense of the pastness of the text cannot simply be allowed to reify into an ultimate description of its initial historical context, supplying the one true interpretation.<sup>61</sup>

This is precisely what often happens to Westerns. As a past object, "the Western" can be placed alongside similar reified abstractions like "John F. Kennedy" and "the 1950s". Viewed from a distance, the complexities of these objects fall away and they can be readily connected to one another based on little more than their having been around at the same time.

The last of the three critical strands that emerges from Kitses' introduction is myth. This is one of the most frequently employed and hazily defined terms

used in relation to Westerns. It sits somewhere between the other two strands, incorporating elements of both artistic convention and social ideology. It also has an important critical heritage that predates the serious and sustained study of Western films. This heritage starts with Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* in 1950. Smith examines the mythic significance of the West, "the vacant continent beyond the frontier,"<sup>62</sup> in nineteenth century American literature and popular discourse. The notion of the frontier as centrally significant in American mythology has endured, shaping subsequent mythic interpretations of the Western genre. Frontier mythology as a whole can be usefully understood as based around various forms of conflict – between people, concepts and forces – emblematised by the border between settled and unsettled lands, the liminal area between different extremes.

As Will Wright points out, this "binary structure" is a prominent feature of many different kinds of myth<sup>63</sup>. Thus, those seeking to define various incarnations of frontier mythology have been more specific about the kinds of conflict that characterise these stories. Kites presents us with a famous "series of antinomies" under the headings of "The Wilderness" and "Civilisation":

#### THE WILDERNESS

##### The Individual

freedom  
honour  
self-knowledge  
integrity  
self-interest  
solipsism

##### Nature

#### CIVILISATION

##### The Community

restriction  
institutions  
illusion  
compromise  
social responsibility  
democracy

##### Culture

purity  
experience  
empiricism  
pragmatism  
brutalisation  
savagery

The West

America  
the frontier  
equality  
agrarianism  
tradition  
the past

corruption  
knowledge  
legalism  
idealism  
refinement  
humanity

The East

Europe  
America  
class  
industrialism  
change  
the future<sup>64</sup>

In his employment of these master categories, Kites acknowledges his debt to Smith's conception of frontier myth<sup>65</sup>. In this particular inflection of the myth, the West is defined in opposition to more established (European) American settlements that preceded it. Richard Slotkin, in his trilogy of works on frontier mythology in American cultural history, also follows Smith in this respect. Significantly, though, Slotkin points more forcefully to the parallels between conceptual conflict and its actual physical counterpart (suggesting the importance of violence in the genre, which I will address in Chapter 1):

...the processes of American development in the colonies were linked from the beginning to a historical narrative in which repeated cycles of *separation* and *regression* were necessary preludes to an improvement in life and fortune.

*Conflict* was also a central and peculiar feature of the process. To establish a colony or settlement, the Europeans had to struggle against an unfamiliar natural environment and against the non-European, non-White natives for whom the wilderness was home. Violence is central to both the historical development of the Frontier and its mythic representation.<sup>66</sup>

Slotkin's use of the idea of conflict is the broadest and most widely applicable. This allows him to range across four centuries of representations of the frontier in American culture. This can be viewed both positively and negatively. On the one hand, a broad and flexibly applicable definition of frontier mythology stands a better chance of doing justice to the variety found within the Western genre. On the other, it also risks being too general to be usefully applied to the details of specific movies, or even to the finer points of the myth itself. As I have already noted, a large number of myths are constructed around models of conflict. As Wendy Chapman Peek points out, most genres can be understood in those terms too<sup>67</sup>: "Working with this feature alone, one cannot distinguish the Western from the melodrama, the epic, the musical, and so forth." Taking particular issue with Slotkin, Steve Neale argues that:

...there remains a tendency among those who use frontier mythology as a basic framework for discussing the western to view the latter solely as a vehicle for an unambiguous version of the former, to stress the former's overarching characteristics and centrifugal pull rather than the latter's local features and centripetal tendencies.<sup>68</sup>

Slotkin himself acknowledges the limitations of analysing texts primarily as representations of frontier myth. When discussing the short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne, for example, he states that:

Indeed, his moral and philosophical concerns extend so far beyond those of popular hacks who used the same or similar material that any analysis limited to his use of traditional frontier myth-matter is bound to oversimplify the works.<sup>69</sup>

This, however, relies on the distinction that Slotkin makes between "popular fiction" and "great or near-great literature"<sup>70</sup>. This is not always very useful in



the study of Hollywood cinema, which is based around taking the products of popular culture seriously. To his credit, Slotkin repeatedly demonstrates that he is more than capable of doing this, especially in *Gunfighter Nation* (see, for example, his useful and evocative analysis of *Stagecoach*<sup>71</sup>).

More frequently, though, the particular version of the frontier myth that is applied to Western movies is the Civilisation / Wilderness opposition derived from Smith via Kiteses. The problem here is not generality, but specificity. In Smith's work, the centrality of the Civilisation / Wilderness divide emerges out of the particular conditions of the historical period under examination. *Virgin Land* ends with a discussion of Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Hypothesis, which stressed both the historical significance of westward expansion and the end of this process. Crucially, Smith deals with a period of history in which there was an actual frontier, beyond which there was wilderness, into which American civilisation sought to expand. In the literary and other sources that Smith examines, the juxtaposition of civilisation and the wilderness is lent greater prominence by its contemporary relevance. Thus, when Smith discusses the conflict between the idealised notion of the unspoilt wilderness and the expansionist impulses of Manifest Destiny, it is not in terms of nostalgic reflection on the past, but of the demands and debates of the present:

A romantic love of the vanishing Wild West could be no more than a self-indulgent affectation beside the triumphant official cult of progress, which meant the conquest of the wilderness by farms and towns and cities. If there was a delicious melancholy for sophisticated and literary people in regretting the destruction of the primitive freedom of an untouched continent, the westward movement seemed to less

imaginative observers a glorious victory of civilisation over savagery and barbarism.<sup>72</sup>

In Smith's account, cultural history is lent the emphatic force of current affairs. At this point, it is worth providing another couple of examples, if only to introduce some other key aspects of frontier mythology which will be relevant at later points in this thesis. The first is the character of Natty Bumppo or Leatherstocking, the frontiersman and prototypical Western hero featured in a series of novels by James Fenimore Cooper, starting with *The Pioneers* in 1823. Although Cooper set all but one of the novels in the previous century, Smith relates the figure of Leatherstocking to contemporary concerns about civilisation and the wilderness provoked by continued westward expansion:

The character was conceived in terms of the antithesis between nature and civilisation, between freedom and law, that has governed most American interpretations of the westward movement. Cooper was able to speak for his people on this theme because the forces at work within him closely reproduced the patterns of thought and feeling that prevailed in the society at large.<sup>73</sup>

Elsewhere in *Virgin Land*, Smith examines the social, economic and geographical factors that influenced conflicting representations of the Western plains. To facilitate continued agricultural expansion, conceptions of the plains as harsh and inhospitable – “the myth of the Great American Desert”<sup>74</sup> – had to be overcome and replaced by “the westward extension of the myth of the garden.”<sup>75</sup> Whilst the levels of rainfall in the plains meant that this perceptual shift was “contrary to empirical possibility”<sup>76</sup>, it was urged on by some powerful economic imperatives:

The myth had behind it the momentum of fifteen hundred miles of frontier advance across the Mississippi Valley. In addition, it coincided

with the economic interest of every landowner in Kansas and Nebraska, and of every business enterprise in these new states.<sup>77</sup>

Also supporting it was the ingrained cultural supposition that “civilisation depended on agriculture.”<sup>78</sup> This can be seen to continue informing the representations of farmers in Hollywood Westerns. Smith demonstrates the historical basis of the continued cultural dichotomy in which the West can be seen as both bleak and oppressive, and fertile and rich with opportunity. The melancholy I identify in a number of Western movies is rooted in this contradictory understanding of the Western environment.

However, to apply Smith’s conception of frontier mythology to Western movies is to take it out of context. As I have already argued, Smith’s observations relate specifically to a time in which civilisation was still in the process of expanding into the wilderness. The conflict between the two is only one of several themes that were available to the makers of Hollywood Westerns, and one which had less contemporary force in settled, urbanised, mid-twentieth-century America. The consequences of relying on a Smith-derived version of frontier mythology in relation to Western movies have been a problematically narrow understanding of the genre and a disproportionate critical interest in films that fit the model. Douglas Pye, referring primarily to Kitses and Cawelti, summarises the problem:

...these approaches deal most fruitfully with those films that strongly animate the ideological field around civilisation and wilderness rather than with the bulk of the genre, which consists largely of formulaic adventure stories or films that have no great interest in the civilisation / wilderness issues as such. This inevitably places at the heart of the genre films with a pronounced social or historical dimension – films in

which the representation of White westward expansion, settlement and social development is central.”<sup>79</sup>

Most frequently, this has privileged the films of John Ford. As I have already argued, Ford is often treated, in criticism and teaching, as representative of the Western genre as a whole. Whilst interest in the civilisation / wilderness issue is by no means peculiar to Ford, he did pursue it in a particularly vivid and elaborated fashion. Kitses points to Ford as exemplifying the kind of mythic ideas and imagery described in Smith<sup>80</sup>. Analysis of Ford’s films in relation to frontier myth yields interesting and illuminating results (again, Slotkin’s discussion of *Stagecoach* comes to mind). But to conflate the genre, the myth and the filmmaker is to do a significant disservice to all three. Frontier myth in the broadest sense of the term is a useful model because it emphasises the dynamic nature of thematic conflict, the constant two-way traffic between competing extremes. Kitses demonstrates this in his table of oppositions, remarking on the “ambivalence” evident in the drifts and fluctuations on each side.<sup>81</sup> Continued attention to the tension and dialogue between opposites in Western movies is critically valuable in that it discourages generalisations and reductive assessments.

This main section of the literature review has been primarily concerned with acknowledging and engaging with some of the themes and perspectives that have dominated the discussion of Westerns. Although my own approach is informed by my familiarity with this critical tradition, and I have illustrated some of the ways in which I will be employing it, it should also be clear by this point that it functions primarily as background to my work in this thesis.

Although I will draw on the relevant themes and discourses, I do not intend to develop my arguments along the conventional lines of, for example, historical allegory or frontier myth. I should now, therefore, discuss some of the critical approaches that correspond in some respects more closely to my own, and situate them in relation to the rest of the field.

My review so far has repeatedly demonstrated the tendency of interpretations of the Western genre to incline themselves outwards, towards various wider concerns. Less critical attention has been paid to what might be called the inner life of Westerns – the genre's characteristics of mood and tone, its affective dimensions. Jane Tompkins' *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (from which I borrow the phrase) is an interesting exception. Tompkins' provocative account of the genre is useful both in the new points of critical departure that it suggests and in the ways in which it demonstrates the possibilities and limitations of Western criticism after the genre's popular decline.

Tompkins proposes that the Western genre in film and literature offers its audiences a particular kind of affective experience. Her focus is on the character and implications of this:

The feeling of being “in a Western” – the kind of experience that is and the effects it has – are what I am attempting to record. Westerns play first and last to a Wild West of the psyche.<sup>82</sup>

This approach produces different points of emphasis to those usually found in the critical work on Westerns. Tompkins' lack of interest in (even hostility

towards<sup>83</sup>) the structural and thematic foci of frontier mythology prompts her to return to specifics. Her examination of Western iconography benefits from close attention to its particular textual functions and effects. She develops her arguments about the genre by connecting details and motifs across a number of Westerns (for example, the list of opening shots she presents at the start of her discussion of landscape<sup>84</sup>). Thus, we get a sense of both their individual significance in our experience of a particular movie, and their wider place within our understanding of the genre. My focus on melancholy requires a similar approach – I too am seeking to describe an experience that certain Westerns offer their audience. This will require the close analysis of the particular ways that melancholy can be expressed in Westerns, but also a wider awareness of how these expressions connect to one another, and how they are facilitated by the conditions of the genre.

Whilst some of Tompkins' observations take up familiar themes (some of her remarks on death and violence, for example, echo those made by Peter Wollen about the films of Budd Boetticher<sup>85</sup>) others foreground important recurring elements that have been neglected in most accounts of the genre. A good example is her summary of the often ambivalent attitude taken towards verbal language in Westerns:

Westerns distrust language. Time and again they set up situations whose message is that words are weak and misleading, only actions count; words are immaterial, only objects are real. But the next thing you know, someone is using language brilliantly, delivering an epigram so pithy and dense it might as well be a solid thing. In fact, Westerns go in for their own special brand of the bon mot, seasoned with scepticism and fried to a turn. The product – chewy and tough – is recognisable everywhere.<sup>86</sup>

Tompkins' focus on these aspects of Western movies is a valuable reminder of their significance to the way we understand and experience the genre. A large body of critical work has helped draw attention to the principal themes and typical narrative structures of Westerns. However, there is still a great deal that can be said about the specific things we are likely to see in these films, and the ways in which our understanding of the genre can be used to inflect our response to them.

Whilst Tompkins' work is valuable simply because it directs our attention towards significant aspects of Western movies, the conclusions that she draws from her analysis are more problematic. Her evocative treatment of textual details is often enlisted in the service of sweeping, unambiguous statements about "the way the Western thinks about the world."<sup>87</sup> As with many of the structural, historical and mythical accounts of the genre discussed above, these statements generally involve the extension of perfectly valid assertions into extraneous or abstract territory. A good example of this is Tompkins' treatment of gender – one of the central strands of her book. Tompkins asserts that Western narratives marginalise their female characters – they "either push women out of the picture completely or assign them roles in which they exist only to serve the needs of men."<sup>88</sup> This is undoubtedly true in many cases, but Tompkins treats it as a central value of the genre – as Gilberto Perez puts it, "The politics of the Western are for Jane Tompkins almost exclusively sexual politics."<sup>89</sup> The sexism of Westerns becomes a monolithic absolute, with Tompkins structuring her account around such rhetorical questions as, "Why are Westerns so adamantly opposed to

anything female?”<sup>90</sup> and “Why does the Western hate women’s language?”<sup>91</sup>. This emphasis threatens to eclipse some of the other issues that Tompkins raises, and obscure the complexities of the genre that she herself engages with. As Douglas Pye remarks, “However central gender now seems to be, the cultural meanings of the Western cannot be restricted to a single theme.”<sup>92</sup>

Pye’s mention of the increased significance of gender refers to one of the important critical conditions affecting writing on Westerns since the 1970s. The emergence of feminism as a prominent part of academic Film Studies in this period has shifted the parameters of what the criticism of Westerns can and cannot accommodate. It has become necessary to address the genre’s often problematic handling of gender and its reputation as overwhelmingly male both in focus and appeal. Whilst this can very usefully illuminate certain aspects of Westerns, it is only one of several important issues. It can also lead to the indiscriminate condemnation or dismissal of films, or even the whole genre, on ideological grounds. With their reputation, both as a male genre and as the emblematic genre of classical Hollywood, Westerns can be easily cast in the role of the “bad object” of ideological analysis (at this point I am reminded that Laura Mulvey quotes Budd Boetticher midway through ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’<sup>93</sup>).

Tompkins is admirably self-reflexive about these possibilities and tendencies. In the section dealing with her visit to the Buffalo Bill museum in Cody, Wyoming, she admits that she had to check her own impulses towards ideological condemnation: “...how eager I had been to get off on being angry



at the museum. The thirst for moral outrage, for self-vindication, lay pretty close to the surface.”<sup>94</sup> However, some of the conclusions she draws about Westerns do retain an element of this. Her investigation into the genre’s gender politics produces some very interesting analysis of the behaviour of Western heroes, particularly in terms of the ways they do and do not show emotion:

...what distinguishes the hero from the villains in a Western is that *he still feels* despite all the horror he has seen and all the horror he has perpetuated. In fact, that is how we know he is tough in the way that a hero has to be, for his face shows that he has had to harden himself against his own feelings.<sup>95</sup>

Observations like these, however, are used by Tompkins to suggest that Western movies have had an identifiable negative effect on male behaviour towards women, that their influence has encouraged men to be distant, even cruel:

Young boys sitting in the Saturday afternoon darkness could not ride horses or shoot guns, but they could talk. Or rather, they could learn how to keep silent. The Western man’s silence functions as a script for behaviour; it expresses and authorises a power relation that reaches into the furthest corners of domestic and social life.<sup>96</sup>

...

In the course of providing a set of master images that tell men how to behave in society, Westerns teach men that they must take pain and give it, without flinching.<sup>97</sup>

This is an interesting variant on the critical tendency to relate the meanings of Westerns outwards. It shares its tone with the historical readings of the genre that almost seem to blame the movies for the social and political phenomena that they allegedly reflect (Stanley Corkin probably comes the closest to

actually doing this). Once again, this returns us to the question of retrospection. It is only from a retrospective viewpoint that these elements of Westerns can be emphasised and these kinds of connections can be made. As we have seen with Tompkins, this can be both beneficial and detrimental. It can provide an overview of the genre which can bring out the significance of recurring features, but it can also promote a sense of distance which can seem to license speculative interpretations.

Tompkins' productive emphasis on the experience offered by Westerns has a somewhat unlikely precursor in Robert Warshow's 1954 article, 'The Westerner', an important early piece on the genre from the days before academic Film Studies. Tompkins' own view of Warshow's article is adversarial – she claims it “spurred me on by making me angry”<sup>98</sup> – but the two writers share a focus on the characteristic thoughts and feelings that Westerns provoke. In their own way, they are both interested in examining what Warshow would elsewhere call “the actual, immediate experience of seeing and responding to the movies as most of us see them and respond to them.”<sup>99</sup> This can be seen in the way their contrasting arguments about the genre gravitate towards the same internal features of Western movies, such as horses<sup>100</sup> and violence<sup>101</sup> (I will return to both critics' thoughts on the latter in Chapter 1 of this thesis) and attach the same affective significance to them.

Warshow's piece is perhaps the single source I draw on most extensively throughout this thesis. There are a number of reasons for this. Most obviously, it is because Warshow explicitly identifies a dimension of

melancholy in Westerns, which he ascribes in particular to the figure of the hero,<sup>102</sup> who is the main focus of the article. I will consider this aspect of Warshow's account in more detail in the next section of this thesis, when I address the issue of melancholy more directly. Another aspect of the article that makes it a particularly significant influence on my own approach is Warshow's emphasis on the formulaic and conventional qualities of Westerns as sources of richness and complexity. He describes the genre as,

...an art form for connoisseurs, where the spectator derives his pleasure from the appreciation of minor variations within the working out of a pre-established order.<sup>103</sup>

Whilst this can be seen as a standard assumption of the study of popular genres, what distinguishes Warshow's approach is his insistence that the contradictions and ambiguities that he identifies are an ordinary part of the experience that the genre offers its audience. He develops the implications of these elements in a complex and sophisticated fashion – Kitses describes Warshow's focus as “at once formal, thematic, ideological”<sup>104</sup> – but he does not suggest that they are in any way obscure, or detached from the meanings that Western movies routinely make available. In this way, Warshow provides a model for taking popular genres seriously in their own right. My examination of the ways in which melancholy can be expressed within the conventional terms of the Western genre follows Warshow's example in this respect.

Warshow's positive treatment of formula and convention, and his hostility towards movies such as *High Noon*<sup>105</sup> and *Shane*<sup>106</sup> (George Stevens, Paramount, USA, 1953), which introduce subjects or styles which he

considers to be extraneous, has led to his approach being, in Kitses' words, "scolded" for being overly "prescriptive"<sup>107</sup>. Because of this quality, 'The Westerner' is often grouped with André Bazin's 'The Evolution of the Western'<sup>108</sup> and its concept of "the superwestern"<sup>109</sup>. Bazin defines "the superwestern" as:

...a western that would be ashamed to be just itself, and looks for some additional interest to justify its existence – an aesthetic, sociological, moral, psychological, political, or erotic interest, in short some quality extrinsic to the genre and which is supposed to enrich it.<sup>110</sup>

The accusation that both Bazin and Warshow rely on too narrow a conception of what a Western should legitimately contain is a valid one in both cases, but it needs to be viewed in context. Crucially, their viewpoint is not a retrospective one. I have already argued that it is important to remember that the early work of Kitses, Cawelti and Wright was written towards the end of the period in which Westerns were still a major popular genre. A similar point applies to Warshow and Bazin. Writing in the mid-1950s, a decade, according to Ian Cameron, of "unequalled richness"<sup>111</sup> for the genre, they had no way of knowing the extent of the changes to both the character and popularity of Westerns that would occur in the decades that followed. They had a much stronger sense of the genre as something familiar and current and expected its basic format<sup>112</sup> and appeal<sup>113</sup> to endure. Thus, they viewed "the superwestern" and its like as aberrations, individual departures from the established standard rather than indications of any wider change or development. Bazin seems particularly confident about this:

If the western was about to disappear, the superwestern would be the perfect expression of its decadence, of its final collapse. But the western is definitely made of quite other stuff than the American comedy or the crime film. Its ups and downs do not affect its existence very much. Its roots continue to spread under the Hollywood humus and one is amazed to see green and robust suckers spring up in the midst of the seductive but sterile hybrids that some would replace them by.<sup>114</sup>

Although the genre as they understood it would not endure, it is still possible to view the two critics' commitment to a particular version of the Western in a more positive light. Their resistance to additions and augmentations to the genre is based on a belief that Westerns can be sufficiently complex and expressive in their own right. If we can recognise this, it can bring us back to a sense of the richness offered by its formulas and conventions.

One way in which critics often express the distinctiveness, depth and level of elaboration of these conventions is by referring to the genre as if it were a self-contained world. Edward Buscombe, for example, asserts that:

The Western is a world of its own; a world more fully-rounded, solid and extensive, perhaps, than any other in fiction; to many more real than any but the one we actually inhabit.<sup>115</sup>

Beyond its rhetorical convenience, this understanding has a particular relevance to my examination of the genre. To think of Westerns as offering us a particular world entails considering the parameters of this world, the way the movies control and limit our sense of what is possible within it. The concept of possibility is a resonant one in relation both to popular genres, which are structured around a particular set of defined possibilities, and to

melancholy, which can take the form of a diminished or restricted sense of what is possible.

Because it is particularly useful to me to refer to Westerns in these terms, I will consider their implications a little further by looking at the approaches to the examination of fictional and generic worlds suggested by V.F. Perkins and Deborah Thomas. Perkins proposes that a productive way of interpreting particular aspects of the narrative, style and tone of a movie is to situate them in their wider world and, in doing so, to consider the type of world that they imply. Regarding narrative causality, for example, he argues that, “Why a cause should be understood as a cause, and why an effect should count as an effect, are matters that can be assessed only within a world.”<sup>116</sup>

This world, Perkins suggests, we infer from the available evidence: “We are offered an assembly of bits and pieces from which to compose a world. Fragmentary representation yields an imagined solidity and extensiveness.”<sup>117</sup> This seems particularly relevant to Westerns, with their particularly elaborated iconography, through which small details can be used to suggest much wider associations. Perkins also argues that attention to a film’s narrative world allows us to account for the significance of aspects which might not figure so prominently in a linear summary of its plot:

It seems to be a habit of narratologists, not only in Film Studies, to reduce a story to a succession of events – or rather to the synopsis of a succession of events. Since the synopsis is taken to be an adequate representation of the narrative, it becomes relatively easy to believe that the cause and effect account thereby produced is a revelation of the movie’s narrative process.<sup>118</sup>

Some of the melancholy elements that I will be examining play a central role in the narratives of the Westerns that we find them in, but many others are more peripheral or localised, their significance more apparent across a number of films than in any particular incarnation. Considering both the worlds presented by individual Westerns and the wider generic world of the West provides a more versatile context in which to understand these elements than that of narrative alone.

Similarly, Deborah Thomas notes that the world of a film can contain aspects which threaten to disturb the tone of the narrative, such as “a relatively minor character” who implies a less optimistic perspective than the movie as a whole might wish to convey:

...the film’s apparent uniformity may depend on edging such a character from that part of the narrative world represented onscreen. A good example of such an attempt is the exclusion of Potter (Lionel Barrymore) from the celebration of community in the final scene of *It’s a Wonderful Life*...<sup>119</sup>

The melancholy tropes I focus on in Chapters 2 and 3 can be seen to function in this way. Although they are sometimes featured more prominently, the night-time town and the old man usually only occupy a relatively small part of the world of the movies we find them in. However, their presence within this world can still suggest melancholy possibilities that have to be addressed or dismissed before the narrative can be resolved.

Thomas extends Perkins’ notion of a film’s world into an alternative understanding of genre based on the logic of the world and “the kinds of

pleasure to be offered or withheld”<sup>120</sup> in our experience of it. She uses the two contrasting general categories of comedy and melodrama to describe the kinds of world presented in the traditional array of genres. These worlds are understood in terms of the different degrees of possibility that they imply. The world of melodrama is “repressive and full of danger”<sup>121</sup>, whereas that of comedy “is transformable into something better”<sup>122</sup>. Thomas’ identification of the emotional tone of a world with the scope of possibilities available within it provides a useful basis for aspects of my approach. Her conception of the melodramatic mode, with its sense of fatalism and restriction, can readily incorporate many of the key associations of melancholy. It can also be seen to correspond with harsher and less welcoming representations of the West, going back to Smith’s “Great American Desert”. Indeed, Thomas’ contrasting worlds of melodrama and comedy could be linked to the parallel understandings of the Western environment that Smith observes and that the concepts of frontier myth are based around. Thomas also notes similar contrasts within modes:

...melodramatic films typically contrast a social space of some sort (a domestic setting, a small town, a community, or some other, more general representation of civilisation) with an alternative space (the city’s criminal underworld, a battlefield, the wilderness, for example) where social values and expectations to some extent break down.<sup>123</sup>

This recalls even more strongly the conflicts and juxtapositions associated with frontier myth. By considering genre in these terms, then, I still be able to draw on some of the more established approaches to Western movies, whilst retaining a focus more appropriate to my examination of melancholy.



I am still conscious, however, that my emphasis on the internal qualities of the genre and their role in shaping our experience of Westerns might seem somewhat narrow. With this in mind, I would like to conclude this section of my thesis by outlining some of the broader cultural contexts that my consideration of the genre in this thesis incorporates.

Although much of our understanding of the meanings associated with the characteristic tropes and images of the West comes from their use in Western movies, this is not the only source. As Peter Stanfield asserts, critics have not always acknowledged this fact:

The presumption is that the Western film was the dominant form and that the genre as it was constituted elsewhere took its lead from the movies. This solipsistic, as opposed to syncretic, approach to the study of Western films constitutes a gross misunderstanding, diminishing the influence of other media on film to the point of invisibility and inevitably limits our concept of the cultural function of the genre.<sup>124</sup>

One of the other media that Stanfield identifies as an influence on Westerns is popular music, and particularly Country and Western music, which, as its name suggests, makes significant use of Western elements. Stanfield argues that the commercial success of Country music during the 1930s, and particularly of its Western aspects (which were showcased in both recorded music and low-budget musical Westerns), was a factor in the revival of Western production by major Hollywood studios at the end of the decade<sup>125</sup>. Certainly, the popularity of the music, and the connection that Stanfield proposes to the popularity of Westerns, suggests that it played a part in

developing and inflecting the meanings commonly associated with all things Western.

I will use the context of Country and other forms of popular music to reflect on the significance of various aspects of the Westerns I examine in this thesis. Its relevance is most obvious in relation to Chapter 4, in which I consider the Western title song. In this chapter, I start my discussion by looking at the connection between melancholy elements in popular music (including Country), as observed by Stanfield and others, and the Western genre. Country music will also be an important part of the background to my exploration of the relationship between the figures of the old man and the Western hero in Chapter 3. Particularly relevant to this is the work of the sociologist Richard Peterson, who has focused on the ways in which the promotion of country music has emphasised and perpetuated an understanding of the “authenticity” of certain conventionalised images. Two of the images he looks at are those of the cowboy and the old man<sup>126</sup>. The connections that Peterson identifies between these figures help me to situate my comparison in a fuller cultural context.

One other aspect of Country and Western music that I will draw on in this thesis is its combination of elements from different American regions, predominantly the South and the West. The generic label “Country and Western” is built on the blurring of such regional distinctions. As Stanfield reminds us:

Hank (originally Hiram) Williams dressed in cowboy duds and called his band The Drifting Cowboys, despite the fact that his music and words paid barely a passing reference to the Old West.<sup>127</sup>

Some sense of the cultural affinity between the South and the West and the conventional associations that the two regions share is a useful context for part of my discussion of violence in Chapter 1, because it enables me to draw on the understanding of violence in a Southern context. The significance and appropriateness of violence in Westerns is often judged in relation to the notion of honour. Warshow argues that Westerns “are probably the last art form in which the concept of honour retains its strength”<sup>128</sup>. Elsewhere, the ethic of honour is frequently associated with the history and traditions of the South. Reflecting this, the most in-depth study of the characteristics and cultural history of honour is concerned with Southern society – *Southern Honour*, by the historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown. When I address the issue of honour in Chapter 1, I will use Wyatt-Brown’s work both to help explain the concept, and to convey a sense of the wider cultural traditions that its use in Westerns relates to. Although Wyatt-Brown emphasises the regional and historical specificity of the social conventions he examines,<sup>129</sup> he also argues that the ethic of honour has continued to exert an influence over many aspects of American culture and society<sup>130</sup>. This historical perspective will help to make sense of the role in Westerns played by the highly conventionalised (even aestheticised) attitude to violence implied by honour.

There are, of course, a number of other cultural and historical frameworks that I will be employing to clarify and contextualise my objects of study. In the next section of my thesis, I will draw on a number of these in order to illustrate

some of the associations and implications of my focus on melancholy. This, I hope, will ground my subsequent arguments about melancholy in Westerns in a more substantial context.

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Jack G. Nachbar, 'Introduction: A Century on the Trail', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 30:4 (Winter 2003), p. 179.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Kitses, *Horizons West*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> J. Hoberman, 'How the Western Was Lost', p. 91.

<sup>9</sup> Kitses, *Horizons West*, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-24.

<sup>11</sup> Whilst Wright's focus on myth would seem to qualify him for attention later in this account, I have included him in my discussion of generic form because of the extent to which he emphasises recurring narrative structures.

<sup>12</sup> Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley / Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), p. 13

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971), p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> Wright, *Six Guns and Society*, pp. 29-32.

<sup>17</sup> Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique*, p. 80.

<sup>18</sup> Wright, *Six Guns and Society*, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 186-187.

<sup>21</sup> Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000) p. 141.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>23</sup> Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie*, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Kitses, *Horizons West*, p.17.

<sup>25</sup> Tag Gallagher, 'Shoot-Out at the Genre Corral: Problems in the "Evolution" of the Western', in Barry Keith Grant (ed.) *Film Genre Reader* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 266.

<sup>26</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p. 133.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 133-134.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.134.

<sup>30</sup> Kitses, *Horizons West*, p. 21.

<sup>31</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the ontology of film* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 43.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Edward Buscombe, 'Inventing Monument Valley: Nineteenth Century Landscape Photography and the Western Film', in Kitses and Rickman (eds.), *The Western Reader*, pp. 115-130; Jean-Louis Leutrat and Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues, 'John Ford and Monument Valley', in Edward Buscombe and Roberta E. Pearson (eds.), *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western* (London: BFI, 1998), pp. 160-169; Jane Marie Gaines and Charlotte Cornelia Herzog, 'The Fantasy of Authenticity in Western Costume' in Buscombe and Pearson (eds.), *Back in the Saddle Again*, pp. 172-181; Brian Fairlamb, "'One in a Thousand": Western Stars, Heroes and their Guns', *CineAction* 46 (June 1998), pp. 18-25.

<sup>33</sup> Philip French, *Westerns: Aspects of a Movie Genre and Westerns Revisited* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), pp. 77-81.

<sup>34</sup> Kitses, *Horizons West*, p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>40</sup> Robin Wood, *Howard Hawks* (London: BFI, 1968), p. 37.

<sup>41</sup> Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie*, p. 12.

<sup>42</sup> French, *Westerns*, p. 13.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>47</sup> Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie*, p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>49</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> Scott Simmon, *The Invention of the Western Film: A Cultural History of the Genre's First Half-Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 268-272.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 269.

<sup>53</sup> Stephen McVeigh, *The American Western* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 75.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

- 
- <sup>55</sup> Stanley Corkin, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors: the Western and US History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), p. 20.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- <sup>58</sup> See, for example, Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 1-4 and 489-490 or McVeigh, *The American Western*, pp. vi-vii and 215-218.
- <sup>59</sup> McVeigh, *The American Western*, p. 13.
- <sup>60</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 3-4.
- <sup>61</sup> Tom Gunning, 'Film History and Film Analysis: The Individual Film in the Course of Time', *Wide Angle* 12:3 (July 1990), p. 16.
- <sup>62</sup> Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1950), p. 4.
- <sup>63</sup> Wright, *Six Guns and Society*, p. 23.
- <sup>64</sup> Kitses, *Horizons West*, p. 11.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- <sup>66</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 11.
- <sup>67</sup> Wendy Chapman Peek, 'The Romance of Competence: Rethinking Masculinity in the Western', *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 30:4 (Winter 2003), p. 212.
- <sup>68</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, pp. 135-136.
- <sup>69</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier. 1600-1860* (Middletown CT, Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p. 475.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 470.
- <sup>71</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 303-311.
- <sup>72</sup> Smith, *Virgin Land*, p. 52.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61
- <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.
- <sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- <sup>79</sup> Douglas Pye, 'Introduction: Criticism and the Western', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of The Western*, p. 10.
- <sup>80</sup> Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood* (London: BFI, 2004), p. 42.
- <sup>81</sup> Kitses, *Horizons West*, p. 11.
- <sup>82</sup> Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 6.
- <sup>83</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 27-28.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

- 
- <sup>85</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 24 and Peter Wollen (as Lee Russell) 'Budd Boetticher', originally published 1965, version cited in Kitses and Rickman (eds.) *The Western Reader*, p. 197.
- <sup>86</sup> Tompkins, *West of Everything*, p. 49.
- <sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- <sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.
- <sup>89</sup> Gilberto Perez, *The Material Ghost: Films and their Medium* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 236.
- <sup>90</sup> Tompkins, *West of Everything*, p. 42.
- <sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- <sup>92</sup> Pye, 'Introduction: Criticism and the Western', p. 12.
- <sup>93</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16:3 (Autumn 1975), p. 11.
- <sup>94</sup> Tompkins, *West of Everything*, p. 202.
- <sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.
- <sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- <sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- <sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. viii.
- <sup>99</sup> Robert Warshow, 'Author's Preface', in Warshow, *The Immediate Experience*, p. xl.
- <sup>100</sup> Tompkins, *West of Everything*, pp. 89-109 and Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', originally published 1954, version cited in Warshow, *The Immediate Experience*, p.109, p. 114.
- <sup>101</sup> Tompkins, *West of Everything*, pp. 227-229 and Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 110, pp. 121-124.
- <sup>102</sup> Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 107.
- <sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- <sup>104</sup> Kitses, 'Introduction: Post-modernism and The Western', p. 25.
- <sup>105</sup> Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', pp. 117-119.
- <sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.
- <sup>107</sup> Jim Kitses, 'Introduction: Post-modernism and The Western', p. 25.
- <sup>108</sup> See, for example, Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp. 12-13.
- <sup>109</sup> Bazin, 'The Evolution of the Western', p. 150.
- <sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- <sup>111</sup> Ian Cameron, 'Foreword', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of The Western*, p. 7.
- <sup>112</sup> Bazin, 'The Evolution of the Western', p. 157.
- <sup>113</sup> Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 121.
- <sup>114</sup> Bazin, 'The Evolution of the Western', p. 152.
- <sup>115</sup> Buscombe, 'The Western: A Short History', p. 15.

---

<sup>116</sup> V.F. Perkins, 'Where is the world? The horizon of events in movie fiction', in John Gibbs and Douglas Pye (eds.), *Style and meaning: studies in the detailed analysis of film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005.), p. 22.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>119</sup> Deborah Thomas, *Beyond Genre: Melodrama, Comedy and Romance in Hollywood Films* (Moffat: Cameron and Hollis, 2000), p. 19.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>124</sup> Peter Stanfield, 'Country music and the 1939 Western: from Hillbillies to Cowboys', p. 22.

<sup>125</sup> See ibid., p. 22 and Peter Stanfield, *Horse Opera: The Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy* (Urbana / Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 7, p. 149, p. 154.

<sup>126</sup> Richard Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 55-68, pp. 81-84.

<sup>127</sup> Stanfield, 'Country music and the 1939 Western: from Hillbillies to Cowboys', p. 24.

<sup>128</sup> Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 111.

<sup>129</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honour: Ethics and Behaviour in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 3-4 and pp. 20-21.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., pp. xv-xvi.



### Introduction to Melancholy

Since the bulk of this thesis is devoted to arguing that various aspects of Western movies, and our responses to them, can be usefully and interestingly seen as melancholy, I first need to introduce the concept of melancholy, and give some indication of what it means in this context. It is not my intention to provide a fixed, all-encompassing definition of melancholy – this is neither desirable nor, arguably, possible – but rather to reflect on some of the different ways it has been understood over time, and to suggest how some of these might be relevant to my examination of Westerns.

Melancholy has been characterised in many different ways over many different historical periods. Because of this, it has accumulated an array of contradictory associations. Melancholy and those affected by it have been variously portrayed as manic, lethargic, aloof, earthbound, volatile, silent, individual, generic, insightful, delusional, obsessive, disinterested, blessed and damned. The one constant is sadness. In her overview of some of the important thematic strands in its history, Jennifer Radden notes that “From the earliest Hippocratic writing, melancholy is seen to involve states of fear and sadness, and this account of melancholic subjectivity varies little throughout the centuries.”<sup>1</sup> Certainly, when we say that someone or something is melancholy, we are saying that they are sad. But we are also invoking a history of acquired connotations which can inflect this sadness in a number of ways.

When considering melancholy from the perspective of the early twenty-first century, one of the more immediate associations is that of history itself, of age, even antiquity. Naomi Schor remarks that “Melancholy is an old affect”, and reminds us that it was already old by the nineteenth century<sup>2</sup>. For some time, then, melancholy has suggested a connection to the past. The word itself is ancient Greek. It means “black bile”, which is one of the four humours, the essential bodily fluids that were believed to determine emotions and personalities. The doctrine of the humours originated in Hippocratic medicine sometime around 400BC<sup>3</sup> and dominated medical science well into the modern era. Today, melancholy no longer has any real medical currency. After the decline of humoral theories, the term “melancholia” survived as a clinical category in nineteenth century psychiatry<sup>4</sup>, but this was largely supplanted in the twentieth century by “depression”<sup>5</sup>. Thus, the sense of a tradition attached to melancholy is accompanied with the sense that this tradition has ended. Melancholy suggests both continuity with the past, and detachment from it. Adam Kitzes comments on,

...its remarkable staying power, its seeming permanent ability to capture the interests of people even when the scientific underpinnings that gave rise to its existence no longer exist; the theory of the humours, along with the notion of the universe being composed along a four element structure, no longer obtains, yet it is still possible to write about melancholy as though it were clear what it referred to.<sup>6</sup>

The accumulated weight of its heritage ensures that the idea of melancholy still lingers. It retains a certain vividness and potency as a symbol even though it is now removed from its previous contexts. This in itself makes it interesting to consider melancholy in relation to Westerns. Although Westerns are a significantly more recent popular phenomenon (crucially, one

whose heyday is still in living memory), both can be seen as now being in their afterlife, their characteristic images and associations remaining familiar but no longer seeming current<sup>7</sup>.

Staying with melancholy, though, we can see how this sense of its oldness accentuates certain aspects of how it has been understood. The most obvious of these is nostalgia. Nostalgia is an important element of what we now call melancholy<sup>8</sup>, and it has been a significant feature at a number of other points in its history. Writing about melancholy has often had a strong nostalgic dimension; its writers have attempted to suggest a connection or affinity with those of an earlier era. Thus, when the Aristotelian notion of melancholy as characteristic of great men was revived in Italian Renaissance thought<sup>9</sup>, part of its appeal was undoubtedly the parallels that it implied between the great men of history and the newly emerging man of genius. Similarly, in the introductory sections to *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton adopts the persona of “Democritus Junior”<sup>10</sup>, explicitly asserting a kinship with the Ancient Greek philosopher.

Another connection with nostalgia is the recurrent portrayal of the melancholy individual as particularly sensitive to the passage of time. Discussing melancholy in seventeenth century literature (and here using “humour” to refer to comedy, wit, etc., rather than in its antiquated medical sense), Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl argue that,

The great poetry in which it found expression was produced during the same period that saw the emergence of the specifically modern type of consciously cultivated humour, an attitude that stands in obvious

correlation to melancholy. Melancholic and humorist both feed on the metaphysical contradiction between finite and infinite, time and eternity, or whatever one may choose to call it. Both share the characteristic of achieving at the same time pleasure and sorrow from the consciousness of this contradiction.<sup>11</sup>

This melancholy sense of time, with its mixture of positive and negative feelings, of appreciation of the finite and regret at its passing, is closely connected to nostalgia. Similar tendencies can be seen in nineteenth century French Romanticism. Melancholy prompted or exacerbated by an awareness of time is a theme in the work of Chateaubriand<sup>12</sup> and is particularly evident in the poetry of Baudelaire. In both 'Chant d'automne' and the last of the four poems called 'Spleen' in *Les Fleurs du mal*, Baudelaire connects familiar images of the passage of time – a change of seasons, the dawning of a day – with reflections on death and mortality<sup>13</sup>. 'Chant d'automne' ends with the poem's narrator both mourning the end of summer and resolving to appreciate the autumn as it passes. Here, nostalgia for the recent past is combined with fleeting aesthetic pleasure in the present, creating the bittersweet ambiguity of mood frequently associated with melancholy.

Westerns have also often been characterised as nostalgic. Stephen Prince goes as far as to assert that nostalgia, and its attendant melancholy, is an essential part of Western movies. Melancholy, he argues,

...inheres in the genre of the Western, forever focused upon the vanishing of the West, a lament for the loss of a frontier whose passing has left the modern era immeasurably poorer.<sup>14</sup>

The limited usefulness of this generalisation is fairly apparent. Westerns are only sometimes concerned with the vanishing of the West and the loss of the

frontier, and it is inadvisable to treat the large number of Western films that do not really engage with this topic as atypical or inauthentic. Prince's remarks, however, still stand as a reasonably good summary of a kind of nostalgic melancholy that can be found in a number of Westerns, particularly in the emphatically historical strand to the genre exemplified by the films of John Ford. The definition of the genre offered by Prince comes from his book on Sam Peckinpah, whose Westerns took aspects of the Ford tradition in particularly melancholy directions, and whose outlook Prince projects back onto the genre as a whole. Whilst the resulting conclusion is misleading, it cannot be dismissed entirely. Ford and Peckinpah are very important and influential filmmakers, and more generally, Westerns, as aesthetic representations of the past, will unavoidably attract nostalgic interpretations. Nostalgia, then, will certainly be a point of reference for my examination of melancholy in Westerns, but it cannot be the only one.

Another dimension that is brought out by thinking about melancholy as something old, something from the past, is that of myth. Art historian Hayden White is particularly explicit about this connection, stating that "Melancholy belongs to the same thought world as astrology, alchemy, monsters, spirits, and gods."<sup>15</sup> Recalling Jim Kitses' distinction between the historical and archetypal bases of the Western genre<sup>16</sup>, we can see that the nostalgic elements of melancholy correspond to the first category, and the mythic ones to the second. Whilst, as with nostalgia, the mythical connotations of melancholy seem particularly pronounced in retrospect, the association between the two is very old. The Aristotelian tradition, in which melancholy is

connected to greatness, emerges in part out of observations concerning the supposed “sorrows of mythical heroes, such as Hercules, Ajax and Bellerophon”<sup>17</sup>.

This direct link between melancholy and classical models of heroism bears some similarity to Warshow’s account of the figure of the Western hero. Comparing him to the “romantic” excesses of the movie gangster, Warshow suggests that “The Westerner is a more classical figure, self-contained and limited to begin with”<sup>18</sup>. Warshow links this “self-contained” quality – which, from its connection to the “classical” we can interpret as a kind of mythic starkness, the potent simplicity of archetype – to melancholy:

...his melancholy comes from the “simple” recognition that life is unavoidably serious, not from the disproportions of his own temperament. And his loneliness is organic, not imposed on him by his situation but belonging to him intimately and testifying to his completeness.<sup>19</sup>

The Western hero, as portrayed by Warshow, is a man isolated by his distinctiveness and integrity. The source of his melancholy is his understanding of the world, his relation to it and the obligations and responsibilities that this entails. It is interesting to note that Warshow explicitly distances his Westerner from a major trope in the traditions of representing melancholy, that of imbalance. This idea is central to conceptions of melancholy in humoral medicine and physiology – melancholy was seen as resulting from greater quantities of black bile in the system, relative to the other three humours. Indeed, whilst the predominance of any one humour was technically regarded as “a pathological condition”<sup>20</sup>, melancholy became

particularly associated with problems of balance and proportion. Mark Breitenburg argues that, in seventeenth century writing, “melancholy becomes the overarching term for anything imbalanced or excessive – whatever is not normal.”<sup>21</sup> Warshow gestures to this tradition (particularly through his choice of the words “disproportion” and “temperament”, both with strong humoral associations) but rejects it in relation to the Westerner. His figure is one of consummate stability, whose melancholy is not the result of a skewed emotional bias, but of a kind of wisdom. In this respect, it resembles more the “harsh and alert melancholy”<sup>22</sup> valorised by nineteenth-century Romantics and associated with awareness and insight.

It is also possible, however, to connect the melancholy of Warshow’s Westerner to his very stability as a mythical type. There is a tension between this aspect of the character and his purpose, which Warshow defines as the assertion of his individuality and worth. Unlike the gangster, he is not looking to distinguish himself through success and its trappings<sup>23</sup>, but his aims, “to state what he is”<sup>24</sup> and “to assert his personal value”<sup>25</sup>, still suggest an unease with the generic and the typical. This is a characteristic tension of melancholy. On the one hand, it has been connected to the individual and the exceptional. On the other, it has been extensively conventionalised, acquiring an iconography of associated images and symbols, from autumn<sup>26</sup> to dogs<sup>27</sup>.

This disjunction was dramatised in Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, through the stock figure of the malcontent. The malcontent defined himself through his melancholy, asserting it forcefully, often ostentatiously. In his

comedic incarnations, this sometimes resulted in characters that were “almost exclusively surface.”<sup>28</sup> Conversely, famously complex characters like Hamlet and Iago arguably draw on many of the same conventions (varying degrees of detachment, reflection, individualism etc.). Crucially, the melancholy of the malcontent was compounded and intensified by his awareness of the very fine distinction between asserting his individuality and conforming to a type. Adam Kitzes claims that,

Above all, the melancholy malcontent was distinguished by deep ambivalence about assuming a disposition that could be mimicked so easily by rivals and status seekers; hence a proclivity among malcontents to distinguish their own “authentic” melancholy from the more “faddish” versions that did nothing but confuse the public on such lofty matters.<sup>29</sup>

Jaques, the malcontent in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, is at pains to establish the unique character of his own melancholy, in contrast to a series of types and their characteristic attitudes:

I have neither a scholar’s melancholy, which is emulation, nor the musician’s, which is fantastical, nor the courtier’s, which is proud, nor the soldier’s, which is ambitious, nor the lawyer’s, which is politic, nor the lady’s, which is nice, nor the lover’s, which is all of these; but it is a melancholy of mine own, compounded from many simples, extracted from many objects...<sup>30</sup>

Like Shakespeare’s plays, the best Westerns demonstrate the results of the vivid realisation of an established generic form. In both, familiar character types are given distinctive individual identities. This disjunction does not result in confusion or incoherence; rather, it further enriches the characters with the ambiguous quality of melancholy.



The malcontent also resembles another melancholy figure, that of the Dandy, as described by Baudelaire and developed in relation to movies by Stanley Cavell. Like the malcontent, the Dandy declares his individuality both within and against convention. Baudelaire defines Dandyism as “first and foremost the burning need to create for oneself a personal originality, bounded only by the limits of the proprieties.”<sup>31</sup> Despite this apparent freedom, though, “Dandyism, an institution beyond the laws, itself has rigorous laws which all its subjects must strictly obey, whatever their natural impetuosity and independence of character.”<sup>32</sup>

The Dandy is melancholy because he is fundamentally and necessarily alone. His absolute insistence on distinctiveness guarantees this. Not merely isolated, he is also somewhat anachronistic, a self-styled aristocrat in a democratic age. Baudelaire lists these qualities in a metaphorical description that once again connects melancholy with the passage of time: “Dandyism is a sunset; like the declining daystar, it is glorious, without heat and full of melancholy.”<sup>33</sup> He attaches a similarly ancient and mythic heritage to Dandyism as we have already seen attributed to melancholy: “Dandyism is a mysterious institution, no less peculiar than the duel: it is of great antiquity...”<sup>34</sup>

Both of these descriptions juxtapose an image of visual overttness or prominence – the glory of the setting sun, the public display of the duel – with something more private and concealed. This element of reserve and restraint, which Baudelaire calls “latent fire”<sup>35</sup>, is taken up by Cavell as the defining characteristic of cinematic Dandies. According to Cavell, the “most

brilliant representations of the type are the Western hero and Bogart”<sup>36</sup>. It is through their restraint, he argues, that we understand the power and significance of these characters:

The feature of the “hidden fire” is essential. Our conviction in the strength of the hero depends on our conviction in the strength and purity of character he has formed to keep his fires banked. Otherwise he is merely physically indomitable, and no man is; in that case, his success over evil would be arbitrary, an aesthetic and moral cheat. He does not *know* he will succeed; what he knows is himself, his readiness.<sup>37</sup>

This summary suggests a combination of integrity and vulnerability. The self-possession of the Westerner is only heroic because we understand it to involve considerable effort, even difficulty. This is a significant element in my discussion of violence in Westerns – the necessity of control over violence, and the problems this entails. It is also important that the Dandy’s fires, though banked, remain visible. Considering his other paragon of Dandyism, Cavell suggests that “Bogart’s familiar mannerisms (the lips caught back, the distracted tug at the ear lobe)”<sup>38</sup> serve this purpose. Within the Western genre, we might offer as an example what Jane Tompkins calls “the characteristic Gary Cooper grimace” and takes to express “a compound of pain, disgust, and determination”<sup>39</sup>. These telling glimpses into the inner life of the Dandy, then, also form an integral part of his outer style. Cavell’s description of one such moment of insight can be related to a form of melancholy that I have already mentioned:

The Bogart character also has a fixed attribute that indicates its depth – the occasion, usually found for him, when he is alone, to laugh at himself, as if at all types and their confinement, putting him and them in perspective.<sup>40</sup>

Bogart reveals his depth by laughing at his own typicality. The uneasy awareness of the tension between these two aspects recalls once again the melancholy of the malcontent. The Dandy, however, differs from the malcontent in his emotional restraint. This restraint intensifies our sense of his melancholy, making its manifestations starker and more poignant. The two facets of the Dandy's isolation – on the one hand, his withdrawal, on the other, "his taste for distinction"<sup>41</sup> (as Cavell ascribes to Alan Ladd in *Shane*) – demonstrate that melancholy can be both obscure and ostentatious. It is both a feeling and a style. Indeed, as the cinematic Dandy demonstrates, the relationship between the two can be reciprocal, the feeling lending authenticity to the style, the style intensifying the feeling.

However aesthetically compelling a figure the Dandy is, he can have troubling moral implications. Cavell pursues these implications to suggest a more general melancholy in Westerns. The Dandy's attractiveness and integrity do not guarantee goodness. If the Dandy is good, it is because goodness offers him the most appropriate style through which to express himself. Consider Warshow's remarks on the ethical allegiances of the Westerner:

We know he is on the side of justice and order, and of course it can be said he fights for these things. But such broad aims never correspond exactly to his real motives; they only offer him his opportunity.<sup>42</sup>

When this is evident, as it is in some Westerns, Cavell suggests that it complicates our assessment of the world that the movies depict. In it, we see that goodness is far from typical, that its position is fragile and precarious and that its victory relies on its ability to compel and justify its defence. In a

difficult but insightful passage, Cavell argues that:

...it cannot be true that the satisfaction of powerful Westerns consists merely in viewing again and again the triumph of good over evil. If that were all, the arbitrariness of victory would have only the anxious pleasure of watching a game of chance. The anxiety in the Western is a deeper one, watching the play of fate. The victory is *almost* arbitrary, and the hair's-breadth lets in the question: What is the fate that chooses the stronger to defend the good? Evil is always victorious in the short run, why not forever? Why is it the fate of good in an evil world ever to attract strength in its behalf, and strengthen it? Because God is a mighty fortress? So is a mighty fortress, and it is very hard to tell one from another. And in the all but complete absence of public virtue, and the all but invincible power of the empty demagogue and the empty mass filling one another's spirits, how much do we depend upon a point at which the desire for good appears fairer than the taste of rancour and the smell of power?<sup>43</sup>

The knowledge that this is the case, that "The Dandy would not be moral at all, would not champion the good, unless he found goodness *attractive*,"<sup>44</sup> that the world he inhabits is such that Cavell can describe it as "evil", that so much is therefore staked on so little, is melancholy. One of the many definitions of melancholy offered by Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl is "awareness of life's menace and sufferings"<sup>45</sup>. This awareness, I would argue, is often a characteristic feature of the view of their world that Western movies offer.

Cavell's interpretation of Westerns is doubly melancholy, because it is also nostalgic. He is writing about the archetypes and conventions of studio era Hollywood from the perspective of the late 1960s and early 1970s. He addresses a contemporary readership which he assumes shares his impression that these characteristic movie myths are dead or dying:

I assume it is sufficiently obvious that these ways of giving significance to the possibilities of film – the media of movies exemplified by familiar Hollywood cycles and plots that justify the projection of types – are

drawing to an end.<sup>46</sup>

We can see how this sense that Westerns were part of something which now belongs to the past informs Cavell's assessment of the genre. If "conviction in the movies' originating myths and geniuses... has been lost, or baffled"<sup>47</sup>, then these myths are likely to seem all the more fragile and unstable in retrospect. The Dandy, in his classical Hollywood incarnation, is viewed in a similar manner:

We no longer grant, or take it for granted, that a man who expresses no feeling has fires banked within him; or, if we do grant him depth, we are likely not to endow him with a commitment to his own originality, but to suppose him banking destructive feeling.<sup>48</sup>

If the honour and integrity of the Dandy are no longer apparent, then these traits seem to have been less assured all along. Hindsight makes every decline seem inevitable. For Cavell, the appeal of the myths of Hollywood is in part a melancholy one, coloured by the sense of their loss.

The idea of loss has come to be an important part of how melancholy is understood. Radden argues that this element was introduced by Freud, in his 1917 essay 'Mourning and Melancholia', and was not considered to be a significant feature of melancholy prior to this<sup>49</sup>. It is not my intention to make use of the clinical term "melancholia", as defined by Freud and others, in my analysis of Westerns. For my purposes, I am making the same terminological distinction made by Mark Nicholls in his psychoanalytically-inclined account of Martin Scorsese's adaptation of *The Age of Innocence*, but coming down on the opposite side. Nicholls states that:

I have favoured the use of the word “melancholia” with its suggestion of psychiatric disease over “melancholy,” which is a distinction particular to the English language suggesting a habitual sadness.<sup>50</sup>

As will already be apparent, I am interested in melancholy as a mood or feeling, and will therefore continue to avail myself of the term to avoid introducing too many medical connotations. All that said, I will comment briefly on Freud’s account of melancholia, both because of Freud’s wide and pervasive cultural influence, and because it corresponds in several respects to the broader definitions of melancholy that I am working with.

Freud defines melancholia as a kind of mourning or grief, initially provoked by a loss of some sort, but then turned inwards and directed at the self, causing internal conflict and self-loathing. It is a temporary condition, which “passes off after a certain time has elapsed”<sup>51</sup>. Freud’s description reflects a number of the changes in how the more general concept of melancholy has been understood over time. To be able to conceive of it as having an external cause, however obscure, and a finite duration, would not have been possible while the theory of the humours still prevailed. In humoral physiology, melancholy is a permanent disposition, caused by an inherent predominance of black bile. Its effects might be more or less severe, and more or less evident, but they were continuous and all-encompassing. It would have been “unthinkable in the Middle Ages” to “say that someone was “melancholy today”<sup>52</sup>. The shift in meaning occurred through the more figurative uses of melancholy in literature, which, according to Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl, were “bound to affect everyday usage more strongly than the terms of

esoteric science could do.”<sup>53</sup> Certainly, this way of understanding melancholy has been the most enduring, outlasting humoral definitions and the scientific model that went with them. In this respect, then, Freud can be seen as attempting to incorporate some of the more “poetic”<sup>54</sup> uses of the word “melancholy” into medical science.

Freud’s account engages with the long cultural tradition of melancholy. Because of this engagement, and the subsequent decline in the use of the term after Freud, Radden argues that ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ “represents, in certain respects, the completion of this tradition.”<sup>55</sup> Its presence in Freud’s essay is most evident in the reference to Hamlet<sup>56</sup>, one of the exemplary figures of literary melancholy. This occurs immediately after Freud invokes the recurrent association of melancholy with acute or privileged insight and awareness. Allowing that the self-criticism he associates with melancholia may sometimes seem to be “justified” (in principle if not in degree), he suggests that the individual sufferer “has a keener eye for the truth than others who are not melancholic”<sup>57</sup>. When discussing the somewhat contradictory nature of this self-criticism, Freud also gestures to the degree of display and ostentation that has sometimes been connected to melancholy:

Shame before others, which would characterise this condition above everything, is lacking in him, or at least there is little sign of it. One could almost say that the opposite trait of insistent talking about himself and pleasure in the consequent exposure of himself predominates in the melancholiac.<sup>58</sup>

Amid Freud’s descriptions of the painful symptoms and tortuous internal workings of melancholia, it is still possible to discern a lingering sense of a

potential aesthetic dimension. The influence of several literary and artistic conventions of melancholy can definitely be felt.

Freud in turn has exerted his own influence on these conventions. Outside the domain of psychoanalysis, Freud's main contribution to the idea of melancholy has been to establish loss as another of its key associations. Since the twentieth century, the notion of loss has often been used to portray something as melancholy. A relevant example is that of photography. Photography has been repeatedly described as melancholy, either directly, or through related terms such as pathos and nostalgia. This melancholy has been found in the capacity of photographs, particularly old photographs, to preserve an image of that which has been subsequently lost. For Susan Sontag, who identifies "the main tradition of American photography" with "a mournful vision of loss"<sup>59</sup>, the vividness and specificity of photographs emphasises this loss:

Through photographs we follow in the most intimate, troubling way the reality of how people age. To look at an old photograph of oneself, of anyone one has known, or of a much photographed public person is to feel, first of all: how much *younger* I (he, she) was then. Photography is the inventory of mortality. A touch of the finger now suffices to invest a moment with posthumous irony. Photographs show people being so irrefutably *there* and at a specific age in their lives; group together people and things which a moment later have already disbanded, changed, continued along the course of their independent destinies.<sup>60</sup>

Here, we can see the consciousness of specific losses turning into a more general mood of fatalism. This is a recurring feature of melancholy attitudes to time, and I have already provided other examples of this, such as Baudelaire's poetry and Cavell's reflections on the end of the myths of



Hollywood. Cavell himself remarks on photography in a similar manner to Sontag:

The nostalgia of old photographs is the perception that mortality is at some point to be stopped in its tracks. The figures in them seem so vulnerable, so unknowing of what we know about them, of the knowledge in store for them. We could know this about ourselves, if we could turn the force of nostalgia toward an anticipation of the fact that every moment is always stopped from every other. In the very vulnerability of that embarrassed laugh, in the tilt of the way the foot is turned, in the dust that lies on the shoe or in its hopeful shine, in the crook of the arm where the baby nods, the knowledge of mortality has room to live, even jauntily. There is no better place for the knowledge.<sup>61</sup>

In both instances, the loss associated with photography is that of human life. Sontag and Cavell each suggest that a photograph can function as a kind of *memento mori*, evoking one loss to remind us of the inevitability of others. Cavell's emphasis on nostalgia, however, makes the associated mood seem more wistful or bittersweet than sombre. Through photographs (and, implicitly, through the movies) we can still appreciate some of the distinctive qualities of these lost moments; the loss is not a complete one. Again, this recalls the tendency of representations of melancholy to contain an ambiguous, compensatory quality.

It is perhaps less appropriate to suggest that photographs are inherently melancholy, that they necessarily evoke loss, than to say that these characteristics are brought out by looking at photographs in a melancholy way. One aspect of melancholy that still persists from its origins in the scheme of the humours is its tendency, even as a localised mood, to apply itself to everything, to make the whole world seem melancholy and sadness

seem natural and inevitable. This is the other side to the association of melancholy with insight – the sense that what appears to be a greater sensitivity to the surrounding world is often more a desire to invest it with meaning, to give every object a symbolic significance. This is one reason why the implications of individual melancholy elements in Westerns can sometimes seem to extend so far.

It is striking how often melancholy has been connected to an interest in material objects and what they might be said to mean. In his *Theory of Film*, Siegfried Kracauer develops this argument out of a familiar point about the melancholy of photography:

Now, melancholy as an inner disposition not only makes elegiac objects seem attractive but carries still another, more important implication: it favours self-estrangement, which on its part entails identification with all kinds of objects. The dejected individual is likely to lose himself in the incidental configurations of his environment, absorbing them with a disinterested intensity no longer determined by his previous preferences.<sup>62</sup>

Although Kracauer is perhaps a little over-eager to arrive at notions of photographic detachment and objectivity, the idea that the sadness and alienation of melancholy might result in a greater attention to and affinity with things (as opposed to people) is still a resonant one. Variations on it can be seen in a number of different accounts of melancholy. Walter Benjamin attributes the “unfaithfulness” of courtiers in German tragedies to a fatalistic melancholy which makes them loyal not to the king himself but to the trappings of kingly regiment: “Crown, royal purple, sceptre... [the courtier’s] unfaithfulness to man is matched by a loyalty to these things to the point of

being absorbed in contemplative devotion to them.”<sup>63</sup> This again is linked to the passage of time – kings come and go, but crowns endure. In this way, Benjamin also incorporates the theme of loss. If melancholy makes us despair at the apparent lack of permanence and continuity in our world, it also inspires us to seek these qualities in objects:

Melancholy betrays the world for the sake of knowledge. But in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them... The persistence which is expressed in the intention of mourning, is born of its loyalty to the world of things.<sup>64</sup>

Objects also offer a certain coherence. They can lend a concrete, tangible quality to the moods and emotions associated with them. As such, they have often been employed in attempts to define or express melancholy. Because of its wide variety of connotations and applications, providing a clear definition of melancholy has always been a difficult task. The emblematic objects and icons associated with melancholy (I have already mentioned dogs and autumn; to choose two more at random, donkeys<sup>65</sup> and the sea<sup>66</sup>) have often served to compensate for some of this missing coherence. Adam Kitzes writes that,

...Renaissance melancholy was the conglomeration – really, the lumping together – of several different strands of thinking, not all of which were entirely compatible with one another. To that end, a clear link develops between melancholy and iconography, so much so that the very discipline of iconography can be seen as the response to an overwhelming array of symptoms, pseudo-symptoms and idiosyncrasies, all of which somehow needed to be organised.<sup>67</sup>

This impulse to illustrate and categorise was to take some extreme forms, most notably the sprawling miscellany of Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

Although melancholy can never be exemplified by a single object, it is intimately bound up in the idea that objects can carry emotional weight.

The Western is the exemplary genre of objects. It has an extensive and distinctive iconography which plays a crucial role in shaping our interpretations of individual Western movies. This iconography, too, has a strong affective dimension. As Warshow argues,

The two most successful creations of American movies are the gangster and the Westerner: men with guns. Guns as physical objects, and the postures associated with their use, form the visual and emotional centre of both types of films.<sup>68</sup>

I am not interested in asserting that Westerns are synonymous with melancholy. They are certainly not. But I hope that I have sketched out some common ground on which to proceed with a more detailed analysis. Following Warshow, I would like to begin at the “visual and emotional centre”, with guns, and their use.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Radden, 'Introduction: From Melancholic States to Clinical Depression' in Jennifer Radden (ed.), *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Naomi Schor, 'One Hundred Years of Melancholy: The Zaharoff Lecture for 1996' (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art* (London: Nelson, 1964), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Radden, 'Introduction: From Melancholic States to Clinical Depression', p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>6</sup> Adam H. Kitzes, *The Politics of Melancholy from Spenser to Milton* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> I have commented elsewhere on the continued familiarity of imagery from Western movies, coupled with a much vaguer sense of its significance, in contemporary popular culture. See Pete Falconer, '3:10 again: a remade Western and the problem of authenticity' in Rachel Carroll (ed.), *Adaptation in Contemporary Culture* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 64.

- 
- <sup>8</sup> See, for example, Erin Sullivan, 'The art of medicine: Melancholy, medicine and the arts', *The Lancet*, Vol 372 (September 13, 2008), p. 884.
- <sup>9</sup> See Klibansky et al., *Saturn and Melancholy*, pp. 241-251.
- <sup>10</sup> Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, originally published 1621, version cited (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), pp. 1-123.
- <sup>11</sup> Klibansky et al., *Saturn and Melancholy*, p. 234.
- <sup>12</sup> Ronald Grimsley, 'Romantic Melancholy in Chateaubriand and Kierkegaard', *Comparative Literature*, 8:3 (Summer 1956), p. 231.
- <sup>13</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'Chant d'automne' and 'Spleen', originally published in *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857). Versions cited published online at <http://fleursdumal.org/poem/208> ('Chant d'automne') and <http://fleursdumal.org/poem/161> ('Spleen'), accessed March 2009.
- <sup>14</sup> Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (London: Athlone, 1998), p. 119.
- <sup>15</sup> Hayden White, 'Response: The Dark Side of Art History', *Art Bulletin*, 89:1 (March 2007), p. 21.
- <sup>16</sup> Kitzes, *Horizons West*, p. 8, p.13 and p. 20. For a more detailed account, see my Review of Literature, pp. 22-23.
- <sup>17</sup> Sullivan, 'The art of medicine: Melancholy, medicine and the arts', *The Lancet*, p. 884.
- <sup>18</sup> Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 113.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- <sup>20</sup> Klibansky et al., *Saturn and Melancholy*, p. 101.
- <sup>21</sup> Mark Breitenberg, *Anxious masculinity in early modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- <sup>22</sup> Klibansky et al., *Saturn and Melancholy*, p. 238.
- <sup>23</sup> Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 109. See also, Warshow, 'The Gangster as Tragic Hero', pp. 101-103.
- <sup>24</sup> Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 111.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- <sup>26</sup> See Klibansky et al., *Saturn and Melancholy*, p. 9.
- <sup>27</sup> See Bridget Gellert, 'The Iconography of Melancholy in the Graveyard Scene of *Hamlet*', *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (January 1970), p. 64.
- <sup>28</sup> Kitzes, *The Politics of Melancholy from Spenser to Milton*, p. 60.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- <sup>30</sup> William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act 4, Scene 1, lines 10-15, originally published c. 1600, version cited in Stephen Greenblatt (ed.), *The Norton Shakespeare* (London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), p. 1639.
- <sup>31</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', originally published 1863, version cited from *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (London: Phaidon, 1995), p.27.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

- 
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 26.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 29.
- <sup>36</sup> Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 56.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 56.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 57.
- <sup>39</sup> Tompkins, *West of Everything*, p., 219.
- <sup>40</sup> Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 57.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 58.
- <sup>42</sup> Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 110.
- <sup>43</sup> Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 59.
- <sup>44</sup> William Rothman and Marian Keane, *Reading Cavell's The World Viewed: A Philosophical Perspective on Film* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), p. 124.
- <sup>45</sup> Klibansky et al., *Saturn and Melancholy*, p. 245.
- <sup>46</sup> Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 60.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 62.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 67.
- <sup>49</sup> Radden, 'Introduction: From Melancholic States to Clinical Depression', p. 45.
- <sup>50</sup> Mark Nicholls, 'Male Melancholia and Martin Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence*, *Film Comment* 58:1, Autumn 2004, p. 35n.
- <sup>51</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', first published 1919, version cited in Radden (ed.) *The Nature of Melancholy*, p. 290.
- <sup>52</sup> Klibansky et al., *Saturn and Melancholy*, p. 217.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 218.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 218.
- <sup>55</sup> Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy*, p. vii.
- <sup>56</sup> Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 285.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 285.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 286.
- <sup>59</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 67.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 70.
- <sup>61</sup> Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 75.
- <sup>62</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 17.
- <sup>63</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, originally published 1928, version cited (London: Verso, 1998), p. 156.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 157.
- <sup>65</sup> Klibansky et al., *Saturn and Melancholy*, p. 102.
- <sup>66</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 149.
- <sup>67</sup> Kitzes, *The Politics of Melancholy from Spenser to Milton*, p. 10.
- <sup>68</sup> Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 105.

## Chapter 1: Violence

I am using Warshow's notion of guns as a "centre" of significance and emphasis in the Western genre as a way into a broader discussion of violence in Westerns. As well as asserting their "visual and emotional"<sup>1</sup> centrality, Warshow also argues that "guns constitute the visible moral centre of the Western movie"<sup>2</sup>. In both these descriptions, the visual dimension is connected to a more abstract or intangible quality. The importance of guns in these terms, then, is based on their capacity to represent something visually, to articulate issues, values and feelings through their image. If this is indeed the case, then starting by examining the significance of guns should allow me to develop an analysis that addresses wider concerns relating to violence.

Certainly, the violence that most people associate with Westerns involves guns. The image of a gun, particularly that of a six-bullet single-action revolver, has often been used as a metonym for either the historical Old West or the Western genre. Two of the notable early studies of Western movies use the same evocative image in their title: Cawelti's *The Six-Gun Mystique* and Wright's *Six Guns and Society*<sup>3</sup>. Neither work devotes much attention to the role played in Westerns by six-guns themselves – Brian Fairlamb notes that *The Six-Gun Mystique* "delivers less than the title promises on the analysis of that mystique."<sup>4</sup> Instead, the gun in the title serves as rhetorical shorthand for the genre as a whole. I have already pointed to the recurring association of melancholy with the significance or resonance of objects. The symbolic weight attached to guns in Westerns suggests that they would lend

themselves to melancholy representations. However, the relationship of melancholy and violence in the genre is more complex. Whilst a melancholy perspective can increase the status of meaningful objects, it can also diminish that of meaningful action. It is in the various ways that Westerns approach the problem of making violent action meaningful that melancholy can be found.

### *Colt .45* – Establishing the “Right” Relationship to the Gun

The relative values of objects and actions is a central concern of *Colt .45* (Edwin L. Marin, Warner Brothers, USA, 1950), a film named after the most iconic of Western guns. The movie clearly treats guns as significant objects, but it also attempts to establish distinctions between legitimate interest in them and excessive preoccupation. In order to illustrate these distinctions, it has to acknowledge some of the melancholy possibilities that an intense relationship with guns can involve.

The film’s opening titles end with a statement that favours action over objects. Functioning as a kind of epigraph, the statement plays down the significance of the guns themselves and suggests that their character depends on the purpose for which they are used: “A gun, like any other source of power, is a force for either good or evil, being neither in itself, but dependent on those who possess it.” This is presented as an unattributed quotation, making it seem like a proverb or a maxim, an anonymous offering from the established wisdom of the world.



In very general terms, this claim to the essential neutrality of guns is borne out by the action of the movie. It is set at a point in history before six-shooters became widespread in the West, when pistols that had to be reloaded for each shot were still the norm. A promotional pair of Colt .45 revolvers are stolen from gun salesman Steve Farrell (Randolph Scott) by Jason Brett (Zachary Scott), a murderous bandit who uses them to advance his criminal career. Farrell, armed with his own pair of .45s, pursues Brett to reclaim the stolen guns, and their reputation, for the forces of good. Thus we see two identical pairs of guns being used by the villain and the hero, for reasons that are respectively portrayed as destructive and redeeming.

However, the guns do not just passively reflect the disposition of whoever carries them. From the start of the film, the representation of the pistols themselves and their relationship to the characters is more complicated. We first see them under the opening credits. The camera tracks briskly in on a shallow wooden box on a desk. A hand tilts the box towards the camera so that the lid takes up the whole screen. The lid has “Colt .45” painted on it, which serves as both an indication of its contents and as the film’s title card. The hand then lifts the lid and we see that the box is a display case, containing a pair of pistols along with some spares and accessories, each component placed in its own individual indentation, everything arranged in an ordered and attractive fashion [see *Illustrations, Fig. 1.1*]. This image, which persists under the rest of the credits and the opening quotation, does seem to be one of passivity. The guns are contained, positioned and displayed –

objects for aesthetic contemplation rather than use. The image, however, is presented to us with a forcefulness that belies its passive qualities, or at very least suggests that there is something else going on, too. The initial camera movement thrusts us towards the box, giving us little opportunity to apprehend the minimal surroundings (the resulting sense of abstraction is strengthened by the anonymous hands that move the box). The subsequent movements of the box add to this emphasis, first as it rises to fill the frame, and then as the lid swings up through the foreground revealing the guns behind. For a backdrop to a title sequence, the image is quite an assertive one. It hints at the guns possessing an independent power and attraction, an ability to generate significance and compel attention in their own right.

These suggestions, of course, could be dismissed as incidental if they were not developed in the rest of the film. But the guns' active influence on behaviour and events in the movie is repeatedly shown. This is established almost immediately in the opening scene, where Farrell is trying to sell the guns in a sheriff's office. We soon get a sense of there being some strangeness in Farrell's relationship with the weapons he is selling. Most strikingly, the guns are not yet actually for direct sale. They are only, to borrow a term from 21<sup>st</sup> century retail, available for pre-order. Farrell says, "Wish I could deliver them instead of just take orders, but the factory's nearly a year behind." Despite this, he continues his sales pitch as if he had a crate of .45s on hand. This disparity between the availability of the guns and the zeal with which Farrell promotes them is most obvious when the sheriff (Charles Evans) enquires about getting the guns sooner. Farrell explains that

“government orders have to come first,” and then quickly resumes his demonstration of how to load the pistols, seeming to treat their lack of immediate availability as an irrelevance.

There is something excessive about the urgency of Farrell's peddling, as if it were more than work and its object more than profit. As part of the Colt company's advertising, we hear about Farrell's record in the Mexican-American war. He was a cavalry captain, the only man in his unit not to be “killed or captured” because of the combat advantage provided by his pair of .45s. As the sheriff reads this information aloud from the Colt brochure, Farrell temporarily abandons his friendly banter and rehearsed routine, perches on the edge of the sheriff's desk and stares off into the distance. The film's main musical theme strikes up on the soundtrack, its underlying rhythmic pulse accentuated to suggest a military march, reinforcing the impression that Farrell is soberly revisiting his memories of war. The camera tracks in on the pistols in his hands, first pointed upwards in readiness and then – accompanied by a fanfare of brass – with their barrels crossed, as in a military emblem or insignia<sup>5</sup>. The significance of the guns to Farrell clearly extends far beyond that of a product that he endorses. They represent a connection to his past (I will return to this point later in relation to guns in other Westerns) and a debt of honour. He behaves as if he is beholden to the pistols themselves for ensuring his survival and is thus compelled to promote them constantly, even in places too far west for the Colt company's distribution to have reached yet. There is an element of melancholy contemplation to Farrell's attitude to the guns. They are invested with

powerful and conflicting emotions – gratitude, nostalgia, grief and pride. His relationship to his job is more one of personal loyalty than professional obligation.

As effective as the scene is for establishing the central place of the guns in the narrative, we are not asked to accept Farrell's enthusiasm without question. If anything, it is presented as somewhat misdirected. A large part of this comes from the sense that the job of travelling gun salesman is unbecoming of a Western hero played by Randolph Scott. Fairlamb comments on the disjunction between the conventional expectations of the job, the role and the star:

[*Colt .45*] affords the heroic position to a gun salesman, a character normally portrayed (*cf. Winchester '73*) as devious or villainous. Dressed in a formal jacket when introduced in this role, he does, however, still retain Randolph Scott's trademark neckerchief.<sup>6</sup>

The stock figure that Fairlamb is alluding to is the callous, exploitative Indian trader type, but Farrell, with his display case and ingratiating manner, is closer to the more domesticated kinds of salesmen often found in Western towns. Examples of characters based around these conventions include Peacock (Donald Meek) the whiskey drummer in *Stagecoach*, who is so softly spoken that other characters keep calling him "Reverend", and Zender (James Westerfield) in *Man With The Gun*, a lawyer who poses as a salesman, first of whiskey and then of women's clothing, in order to observe the protagonist and manipulate him into a trap. Although usually presented as less contemptible than the man who sells guns or whiskey to the Indians, this figure is still generally characterised by a degree of passivity or inauthenticity, falling short,

in one way or another, of the conventional expectations of masculine integrity that are associated with the hero. Thus, Farrell is initially portrayed as compromised and diminished by his devotion to the guns. The clearest indication of this is his war record, which we are invited to perceive as heroic, being appropriated into advertising copy. In his reference to Farrell's costume, Fairlamb also points to the subsequent emergence of a more suitable and familiar persona for Scott, which the film quickly gives us once the guns are stolen. Farrell "soon adopts the authentic Westerner's codes of dress"<sup>7</sup> in the more appropriate roles of self-appointed bounty hunter and later deputy sheriff that he takes on in pursuit of Brett and the weapons. His regained authenticity is shown through a series of shots of him riding west which emphasise his iconic outline – the classic image of the Western hero on horseback.

For the rest of the movie, Farrell's own .45s are much more integrated into his appearance, worn in readiness for action with little comment or self-consciousness. The disproportionate fixation with the guns passes on to Brett. When he escapes with them early in the movie, we see him riding out into the wilderness. He stops his horse, turns around to look and see if there is anyone following him, pulls out the pistols and pauses for a moment to brandish and admire them. There then follows a montage of Brett's escalating criminal exploits. Superimposed months on a calendar indicate the passage of time as Brett proceeds from robbing individuals to groups, then a stagecoach, then an express office, gaining henchmen and a more

flamboyant wardrobe as he does so. Each section of the montage ends with a close shot of the .45s in Brett's hands, drawn at hip height and firing.

There are two aspects of this that need to be noted. First, Brett is always shown firing the guns *after* he has used the threat of them to get what he wanted. It is presented to us as an act of gratuitous cruelty – his victims give him their money so that he will not shoot them, but he shoots them anyway. Second, the emphasis during the shooting is neither on Brett nor his victims, but on the guns themselves. In the close shots we see Brett only from his waist up to his chest. The absence of his face makes his violence seem oddly automatic and impersonal, more to do with the guns than with him. The point seems less that he takes pleasure in killing than that he relishes the act of firing the guns and will do so without a reason if no other justification presents itself. Although his indifference to the consequences of his actions still marks him as morally culpable, both his success as a criminal and the excesses of his behaviour seem to stem from the guns and their influence.

The extent to which Brett's identity is dominated by the guns is shown in the wanted poster that Farrell examines when he goes after him [see *Illustrations, Fig. 1.2*]. On it, Brett is referred to as the "Leader of .45's Gang", and the only description of him is that he carries the two guns. There is no picture, unlike on the information posters distributed to warn law officers about Farrell, who is initially mistaken for Brett's accomplice. These display Farrell's face, highlighting the distinct and recognisable image of the movie's star. Despite his success and status as the leader of his gang, Brett never makes an

individual reputation for himself; his name is never widely known. He can hide his .45s and go entirely unrecognised in the streets of Bonanza Creek, the town whose stagecoaches the gang has been robbing for some time. He also never seems to settle on a definitive style for himself, as Fairlamb observes:

[Brett's] costume changes cover the whole range of Western villainy, from dirty, unshaven jailbird, through gang leader with dandyish characteristics, to corrupt town boss in more formal attire, bow tie and all.<sup>8</sup>

The guns remain a constant feature, but Brett's image behind them shifts from situation to situation, indicating a degree of malleability, the absence his own consistent or coherent set of defining characteristics. When Brett clashes with Harris (Alan Hale), the corrupt sheriff of Bonanza Creek who had been working with him, his lack of authority without the guns is exposed. When Harris snatches the .45s and turns them on Brett, he is shown trembling. After Harris is knocked down and Brett retrieves the guns, there is a striking shot of him springing up from the fallen sheriff, the guns flying into his hands as if they had been flung at him rather than picked up. Brett seems to struggle to establish both his balance and his grip on the guns – it is like he has been pushed back by a force that is stronger than he is. This impression is reinforced by our sense of his relative lightness (although almost as tall as his counterpart and namesake Randolph Scott, Zachary Scott is considerably thinner) and the restless, agitated quality to many of his movements. He does not look like he has complete control over his body. It is the guns that are the solid and robust physical presence in this context. Their relationship with Brett is a melancholy one – they seem to offer him the substance and certainty that he lacks.

The name of Brett's ".45's Gang" suggests an imbalance, the status of the guns elevated out of proportion. This feature is echoed in a moment from a Western from long after the period I am covering. In *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, Malpaso / Warner Brothers, USA, 1992), the empty bravado of "The Schofield Kid" (Jaimz Woolvett) is signalled by his obviously self-applied nickname. When Will Munny (Clint Eastwood) asks him if Schofield is his hometown, the Kid explains with misplaced pride that his name derives from his "Schofield model Smith and Wesson pistol". This is a clear indication, to Munny and to us, that the Kid is not the hardened gunslinger that he claims to be. Munny understands the conventions of gunslinger nicknames; the Kid does not, demonstrating the inauthenticity of his persona. In this instance, too, the physical slightness of the character is a factor. The Kid's adolescent appearance – his boyish features and weak facial hair – undermines his claims to violent masculine prowess. Overidentification with a gun continued to carry similar connotations almost half a century after *Colt .45*. By allowing the gun to represent them, both Brett and the Kid show that they are unable to achieve the mastery of violence that they lay claim to.

It is this quality that is re-established when Farrell kills Brett at the end of *Colt .45*. Farrell reclaims the guns for justified, purposeful use. Brett expends his ammunition firing wildly, first through a door at what he thinks is Farrell but is in fact one of his own men, and then at Farrell himself and his Indian allies. Farrell fires only once in the latter part of the movie, when he finally faces Brett in the Bonanza Creek sheriff's office. His focused violence, with its implications of precision and lack of waste, provides an alternative to the



chaotic excesses of Brett's. His relationship to the action is direct, unmediated and personal. This is emphasised in the exchange between Farrell and widow Beth Donovan (Ruth Roman), whom he embraces in the last shot of the movie. She says, "I died a hundred times while you were in there." Appreciative of her concern but disdainful of metaphors, he replies, "I nearly did, once." In his confronting of the risks and implications of violence, Farrell has established a more appropriate context for the guns. During the final clinch, the camera tracks in on the guns one last time. Farrell is holding them behind Ruth's back, their barrels crossed as they were in the opening scene when he was recalling his military experiences. This time, however, the gesture does not point to the awkward disparity between his illustrious war record and his current situation. Rather, it establishes a continuity between Farrell's past and his present, linked through meaningful violence and coherent personal style. The melancholy of the past – of lost comrades and former glories – remains, but it is now channelled more positively.

The quotation at the start of the movie, about a gun being "a force for either good or evil", seems to invite comparison to the infamous National Rifle Association slogan, "Guns don't kill people, people do." From this perspective, its rhetorical purpose is to divorce the guns themselves from the consequences of their use, thus redeeming them as legitimate objects of fascination. And perhaps this is something that the film initially needs to do, to establish the .45s as something worth basing a movie around. Retrospectively, however, the quotation seems more like an assertion of the polarising power of guns, their ability to amplify actions and generate

extremes. Farrell's heroic status and eventual victory depend on his ability to harness this power and curb these extremes. His relationship to the guns needs to be active but controlled. It can neither be the passive association of the salesman nor the excessive indulgence of the bandit.

I have started this chapter with an analysis of *Colt .45* because it is a good way to introduce, in concrete form, many of the main themes I will be addressing in my broader discussion of violence. Richard Slotkin groups the film with other Westerns made after the Second World War which he claims share an increased self-consciousness, "a more highly developed sense of the genre as *genre* than their predecessors"<sup>9</sup>:

The common denominator in all these approaches is a particular kind of abstraction and stylisation. A single element of the Western is isolated from its original context and made the subject of exaggerated attention and concern, even to the point of fetishisation. The tendency is most obvious in a group of Westerns that fetishised particular kinds of weapon...<sup>10</sup>

Whilst I would not necessarily agree with Slotkin's overall characterisation of postwar Westerns, it is certainly fair to describe *Colt .45* as self-conscious. Although ambitious, and relatively well-resourced<sup>11</sup>, it is perhaps one of the less aesthetically successful of the Westerns I examine in this thesis. It is a short, somewhat convoluted movie which to some extent sacrifices coherence for intensity. Randolph Scott's biographer, Robert Nott, describes it succinctly: "*Colt .45* doesn't make much sense, but boy, does it move."<sup>12</sup> But whatever evaluation we might arrive at, it is definitely a film that knows its genre. Its self-consciousness manifests itself in an obvious engagement with many of the major issues of the genre, including those relating to violence:

control, authenticity, style and the relative significance of certain actions and objects. These issues are central to the representation of violence in a large number of Westerns, and are important points of departure for my examination of violence and melancholy.

### The Problem of Meaningful Violence

What these issues have in common is that they all relate to the challenge of making violence coherent, representing and contextualising violent acts in such a way as they make sense. John Fraser discusses a wide variety of the ways in which violent works of art, including Westerns, do this. He identifies multiple sources of the “enduring appeal”<sup>13</sup> of Westerns and their violence. These include the vividness and intensity of its depiction, which can “re-immense us vicariously in physical action”<sup>14</sup>. Another example would be “the exploration of important conflicts leading to weighty physical confrontations”<sup>15</sup>, that is to say, the capacity of the genre to frame its violence in relation to larger historical and political issues (for example, the classic clash between cattlemen and homesteaders). Thus we can see that violence in Westerns can be made meaningful both in its own right – as compelling action – or as a reflection of wider concerns. However, whilst these elements do give us a clearer orientation on the violence we see, there can still be some question as to whether they are able to make it meaningful *enough*. Such ambiguity is a rich source of potential melancholy.

Why finding ways to bring purpose and coherence to the representation of violence is both necessary and ultimately problematic has to do with some of the characteristics of violence itself. The application of damaging or destructive force to a situation may have a clear origin – it may even have a justification – but it will also have consequences that extend beyond this. Hannah Arendt refers to the “all-pervading unpredictability, which we encounter the moment we approach the realm of violence.”<sup>16</sup> Arendt argues that violence frequently exceeds its purpose, and can have results that can be neither foreseen nor contained:

The very substance of violent action is marked by the means-end category, whose chief characteristic, if applied to human affairs, has always been that the end is in danger of being overwhelmed by the means which it justifies and which are needed to reach it. Since the end of human action, as distinct from the end products of fabrication, can never be reliably predicted, the means used to achieve political goals are more often than not of greater relevance to the future world than the intended goals.<sup>17</sup>

It is this chaotic dimension that is held at bay by the representation of violence as somehow meaningful. However, no matter how successfully it is contextualised, our awareness of it as *violence* still remains, and its meaning as such is never entirely limited to its particular function. This can be seen in *Colt .45*. In the film’s presentation of the violence of its hero, Fairlamb identifies,

...the intention to associate the Colt .45 and firearms in general (including the arms trade) with the forces of law and order, discipline, respectability and honesty – the code and demeanour of the authentic Western hero – while attempting to dismiss or gloss over the very problems created by the mass ownership of such lethal weapons.<sup>18</sup>

Although the guns have been reclaimed for exclusive use by the good guys at the end of the movie, we know from innumerable other Westerns that bad guys carry six-shooters too. We are pleased to see the guns' potential for excessive violence contained and under control, but we have already seen this violence, and we know that it is possible. This brings us back to Cavell's point, which I discussed in the previous section<sup>19</sup>, about the anxiety we can experience about the power we see wielded in Westerns. Violent power need not necessarily belong to the forces of good.

One of Warshow's most valuable insights into Westerns is that the contradictions entailed in their portrayal of violence can be a source of enriching complexity, rather than equivocation or incoherence. The best examples of the genre engage with these contradictions and use them to shape our perception of their violence. Our enjoyment of stylish, meaningful action exists alongside an awareness of its more negative implications:

The Westerner at his best exhibits a moral ambiguity which darkens his image and saves him from absurdity; this ambiguity arises from the fact that, whatever his justifications, he is a killer of men.<sup>20</sup>

Warshow proposes that the Western genre "offers a serious orientation to the problem of violence such as can be found almost nowhere else in our culture"<sup>21</sup>, because it recognises both the appeal and the cost of violence. The Westerns that Warshow values treat violence as neither exclusively a matter of ethical principles nor of aesthetic style. They do not condemn violence automatically, but neither do they exempt it from moral considerations. One of the movies that Warshow singles out for praise is *The*

*Gunfighter*. The film's protagonist, Jimmy Ringo (Gregory Peck), asserts on multiple occasions that he remembers exactly how many men he has killed and who they were. He corrects a number of misconceptions and exaggerations as to this matter. We are encouraged to recognise the legitimacy of the moral burden that he bears, but also to admire the directness with which he acknowledges it. Furthermore, despite his weariness and guilt he retains a charismatic grace of action and bearing. At the start of the movie, at the Gem Saloon in Santa Fe, Ringo is provoked into a gunfight by a foolish young man named Eddie (Richard Jaeckel). Having tried to avoid the confrontation, he is forced to shoot when Eddie draws on him. Even under these unfortunate circumstances we can see Ringo regretfully upholding his sense of personal style – he shoots Eddie with his left hand while still holding his drink perfectly steady in his right [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 1.3]. Warshow argues that our sense of Ringo as morally compromised becomes a part of his enduring heroic image:

Deeply troubled and obviously doomed, the gunfighter is the Western hero still, perhaps all the more because his value must express itself entirely in his own being – in his presence, the way he holds our eyes – and in contradiction to the facts. No matter what he has done, he *looks* right, and he remains invulnerable because, without acknowledging anyone else's right to judge him, he has judged his own failure and has already assimilated it...<sup>22</sup>

For my purposes, the tension between different perspectives on violence is very important, because the response it encourages is a melancholy one – an appreciation of the aesthetic dimension tempered with a knowledge of the factors that undermine and circumscribe it. Warshow makes this connection in relation to the Western hero, stating that a “mature sense of limitation and

unavoidable guilt is what gives the Westerner a “right” to his melancholy.”<sup>23</sup>

This sense has a similar effect on us in the audience, combining with and complicating our understanding of the style and appeal of this iconic figure.

### The Violent World

Warshow’s remarks on the melancholy of the man with the gun also point to one of the most basic ways in which Westerns make their violence meaningful. According to Warshow, the melancholy of the Western hero “comes from the “simple” recognition that life is unavoidably serious”<sup>24</sup>. Jane Tompkins makes a similar point when she argues that “One of the hallmarks of the genre is an almost desperate earnestness”<sup>25</sup>, an insistence on the often painful seriousness of physical existence. A common strategy for expressing this seriousness in Westerns is to portray the world as inherently and inevitably violent. This allows the violence of the hero to emerge as a natural response to the conditions in which he finds himself. It becomes part of what connects the character to the setting, making him the “right” man for his milieu. Warshow makes reference to the classic, almost clichéd scenario (dating back at least as far as Wister’s *The Virginian*<sup>26</sup>) in which the heroine unsuccessfully objects to the hero’s pursuit of violence:

If there is a woman he loves, she is usually unable to understand his motives; she is against killing and being killed, and he finds it impossible to explain to her that there is no point in being “against” these things: they belong to the world.<sup>27</sup>

I would now like to look at some of the ways in which Westerns have represented their world as a violent one, and made similar distinctions

between those characters who understand that this is the case and those who do not. These distinctions draw on the traditional associations between melancholy and wisdom or insight. I will start with two versions of the same moment, from the first two of the five Westerns directed by Anthony Mann and starring James Stewart. Both *Winchester '73* (Universal, USA, 1950) and *Bend of the River* (Universal, USA, 1952) contain a scene where the hero and the heroine are in a camp surrounded by Indians. Both scenes involve the recognition or misrecognition of the bird and animal calls with which the Indians signal one another (this is a familiar enough convention that we rarely expect them to actually come from animals or birds). In *Winchester '73*, Lin McAdam (Stewart) tries to pretend to Lola Manners (Shelley Winters) that the calls come from genuine wildlife, rather than the Sioux who are preparing to attack. “Pretty, aren’t they?” he says, “Sometimes they sing all night.” Lola, however, is fully aware of the situation: “I know what they are.” This first incarnation of the moment is the more overtly melancholy of the two, but its significance can be more clearly illustrated if I start with the later version, in *Bend of the River*.

Here, the exchange is longer and more elaborated. Laura Baile (Julia Adams) comments on what she thinks are the sounds of “night-birds”. Glyn McLyntock (Stewart) indulges her misapprehension to avoid frightening her, identifying the “birds” as “redwing orioles” and giving the phrase a knowing emphasis to prompt Emerson Cole (Arthur Kennedy) to play along. This, however, makes the situation increasingly awkward, as Laura is licensed to continue her naïve enjoyment of the sounds: “They’re sort of plaintive. I hope



they nest near our farm.” These lines are delivered in a medium close-up of Laura sitting on a wagon at the edge of the camp [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 1.4]. It is shot with a long lens, so that she is isolated in the foreground from the other settlers at the campfire behind her, who are flat and out of focus. This emphasises both her vulnerability and the personal nature of her reaction to the sounds, which provoke her into wistful musing. She seems confused that McLyntock and Cole are not as fond of the “birds” as she is. When pressed on the subject of whether or not he likes them, McLyntock says “No, no, not for neighbours.” He then quickly changes the subject, urging Laura to go over by the fire and wash a shirt for him, presumably to manoeuvre her towards the centre of the camp where she will be less exposed. The first sign that the small Shoshone raiding party has started its attack, however, is when Laura, despite her more sheltered position, gets hit in the shoulder by an arrow.

The two scenes dramatise different levels of comprehension of the world and its violence (with the melancholy implied by greater awareness of this), and the effect that this has on the relationships between the characters. In *Winchester '73*, this forms part of the process of suggesting the similarities in outlook shared by Lin and Lola, setting them up to form a couple at the end of the movie. In *Bend of the River*, although Glyn and Laura are (at least implicitly) united in the film’s final moments, less effort is made by the film to establish their compatibility. Instead, their coming together is presented as a more or less inevitable consequence of Glyn’s acceptance into the pioneer community that Laura belongs to. As the eldest daughter of the head of this community, Jeremy Baile (Jay C. Flippen), she functions almost as Glyn’s

“reward” for his services to it. But the “night-birds” scene comes near the beginning of the movie, when Glyn, although affiliated to the group of settlers, is not quite yet a part of it. The scene contrasts Laura’s limited awareness of the possibilities of violence and danger with the fuller understanding shared by McLyntock and Cole. This can be seen in the editing, which alternates between the medium close-up of Laura and a two-shot of the two men, and in the multiple levels of meaning in the conversation. There are effectively two conversations going on at once – one between Laura and the men on the nominal topic of birds and one between Glyn and Cole on the real topic of the nearby Indians. Laura’s obliviousness to the immediate threat generates an ironic tension between what the characters say and the situation they actually face. It is this quality that Cole seems to be responding to when he laughs at McLyntock’s remark about not wanting the “redwing orioles” for neighbours.

Laura’s romantic ruminations on what she thinks are birds follow soon after a discussion between Glyn and her father in which Jeremy questions Glyn’s plan to take the settlers on a detour around the mountain that looms in the background. Jeremy asks about the mile-high hills around it: “Just one mile? Is that too bad?” Glyn tells him that “A lot of people had the same idea. Most of them are still up there under the snow.” Both Laura and Jeremy’s remarks reflect a view of the natural world as essentially benign, as consisting of things that enrich their environment (like birdsong) or provide them with opportunities to reach their destination more directly (like mountains). This perspective forms a part of our understanding of the settlers’ broader impulses and aspirations. Their aim is to establish an idealised community of their own in

the wilderness, from which violence can be excluded. Glyn sees the danger in the world that the settlers miss. Jim Kitses refers to the “*pathetic* relationship between man and environment”<sup>28</sup> that is often a feature of Mann’s Westerns, the harshness of the landscape reflecting the violence of the characters within it. Glyn and Cole are attuned to their environment in this way – their common background as Missouri-Kansas border raiders (another thing that the settlers are, at this stage, unaware of) gives them an experiential understanding of violence.

The violence of the Shoshone attack on the camp seems to emerge impersonally out of its surroundings. We do not actually see the Indians themselves until Glyn and Cole go out after them, and their initial presence is indicated by natural-sounding noises. The arrow hits Laura suddenly and seemingly from out of nowhere. The settlers respond by firing wildly into the dark, as if trying to fight back at the night around them. The representation of the attack in this way is an example of the common strategy of portraying Indians less as people than as a malevolent manifestation of the environment, what Tompkins likens to “a particularly dangerous form of local wildlife.”<sup>29</sup> As ideologically dubious as this convention undoubtedly is, it is a part of the generic context through which we understand this scene and connect it to the broader logic that the film establishes for its world. Because that is what the arrow that hits Laura is – an announcement of the violence of the world. The irony that it should be her that the first arrow hits is used to draw our attention to her ignorance of this violence and its potential consequences.

This portrayal of the world as inescapably violent indicates a melancholy perspective, especially when contrasted with the utopian ambitions of the settlers. They seem to defy or deny forces which, as Douglas Pye notes, we know could easily erupt again<sup>30</sup>. This context of fatalistic melancholy, however, is more explicit in *Winchester '73*. The earlier film, the most famous of the cycle (that *Colt .45* also belongs to) of Westerns based around a particular gun, frames its equivalent to the “night-birds” scene in terms of the shared melancholy of Lin and Lola. The characters’ melancholy comes from their knowledge and experience of violence. It is this quality, more than anything, that makes them credible as an eventual couple. Some critics have found the pairing of the characters to be unconvincing. Pye groups the film’s final generation of its couple with that in another Mann Western:

In *The Far Country* and *Winchester '73*, James Stewart is left respectively with the characters played by Corinne Calvet and Shelley Winters. In neither case has a relationship developed that seems a likely basis for the marriage that the end seems to indicate.<sup>31</sup>

Fairlamb argues that Lola functions as a convenient means “to reassert [Lin’s] masculinity and unequivocal heterosexuality”<sup>32</sup> at the end of the movie. He also argues that,

...there is little doubt throughout that McAdam’s treatment of her is inspired by the Western chivalric code and that the gun – with all it represents – is the real object of desire...<sup>33</sup>

Leaving aside the psychoanalytical assumptions implied by Fairlamb, it is still true that Lin’s retrieval of the gun – a “one in a thousand” Winchester rifle that was stolen from him by his own brother, Dutch Henry Brown (Stephen McNally), who also murdered their father – is the film’s main narrative

resolution. The title of the movie makes this focus clear enough. However, the production of a romantic couple need not be the most prominent strand to the story<sup>34</sup> still to be of some importance. The development of Lin and Lola as a potential couple may not take up much of the movie, but it is done with a subtle insistence through moments of slowly increasing mutual understanding and brief but direct connection.

These moments characteristically involve Lola appreciating Lin's consideration and Lin admiring Lola's fortitude. Both of these traits are displayed in the film in circumstances that relate to their wider sense of melancholy. Fairlamb is right to describe Lin's behaviour in terms of chivalry, insofar as his courteous gestures towards Lola are primarily important as *gestures*, that is, for what they exemplify rather than what they achieve. They are tangible manifestations of kindness and comfort in a harsh world, which gives them a poignant value. But rather than simply embodying an impersonal code of conduct, his actions towards her are given very specific significance by their context.

Lin first meets Lola when she is being forced to leave Dodge City by its marshal, Wyatt Earp (Will Geer). As a saloon girl, she is judged to be bad for the image of the town over the centennial weekend. Lin steps in on her behalf, addressing her as "ma'am" and being curt and aggressive with Earp (the first real hint the movie gives us of Lin's capacity for violence). However, he does not follow his aggression up with action, nor does he prevent her expulsion from Dodge City. Nonetheless, his intervention is still appreciated.

Lola leans out the window of the stagecoach she has been bundled onto and says, "Thanks, anyway." He responds with a nod and a tip of his hat. In that brief exchange, the two characters acknowledge both the futility of the situation and the value of the gesture in spite of this. It is the first suggestion of the mutual melancholy that the film subsequently develops.

A similar point could be made about Lin giving Lola his saddle to sleep on after they meet again in a cavalry encampment besieged by Sioux. Here, the wider context for the gesture comes from both the seemingly impossible situation they face, outnumbered and surrounded, and the difference between Lin's actions and those of Lola's fiancé Steve Miller (Charles Drake). Steve had ridden away in panic when first confronted by the Indians, leaving Lola behind. Although he came back to guide her into the camp, the memory of his initial cowardice still hangs over them, expressed throughout this part of the film via a series of anguished and disappointed looks. Lin, by contrast, acknowledges the extent of the danger they are in but still goes out of his way to help Lola. Offering her the saddle does not improve their chances of survival (although they are eventually able to fight off the Indians) but the small kindness stands in stark contrast to the desperate circumstances. Again, it is the fact that both characters recognise and accept the bad situation that they find themselves in that gives the gesture its significance.

This is why Lin's attempt to comfort Lola by lying about the bird calls, another of his chivalrous gestures, is not received in the same way. The previous two examples involved a mutual acknowledgement and acceptance of the

violence that governs the film's world. This can take the form of marauding Indians or the less obvious threat of Wyatt Earp, whose folksy good humour belies his strict control of Dodge City and enduring power to inspire fear, even in Lin. By trying to delude Lola about the bird calls, Lin is attempting to take the whole burden of dealing with this violence onto himself. Lola knows too much to allow this to happen. The directness with which she rejects the fantasy of the bird calls seems to surprise Lin – for a moment, he does not know what to say – and prompts him to answer truthfully when she asks if he is afraid. In this respect, it establishes the two characters as equals.

One of the great strengths of Shelley Winters at this stage in her career was her ability to evoke both youth and experience at the same time. David Thomson describes her persona as “either voluptuous or drab”<sup>35</sup>, but at her best she combines the two, resulting in characters that possess a kind of tarnished vitality. This quality makes Lola, with her awareness of violence and experience of betrayal, an appropriate counterpart to Lin. Both characters are given insight into the way that things work, but this is portrayed as a melancholy burden – in the world the film creates, their wisdom affords them no serenity (consider Laura's attempt at serene contemplation in *Bend of the River*). Their knowledge of violence makes them visibly weary – both Winters' and Stewart's performances emphasise this effect.

But it also enables them to communicate with each other as frankly as the Production Code would allow. Just before the Indians attack, Lin gives Lola his pistol, “Just in case you, er...” When she insists that she knows how to

use it, Lin looks at her gravely. She picks up his implication and says, with an apologetic half-smile [see *Illustrations, Fig. 1.5*], “I understand about the last one.” The convention, in Indian attacks, of saving the last bullet for the white woman, to spare her the possibility of rape, is another problematic but familiar trope in Westerns. As Kim Newman puts it, “The threat of red lust to white womanly virtue is a spectre that stalks the genre from Fenimore Cooper onwards”<sup>36</sup>. In this instance, though, the significant point is that Lola knows this convention. Compare her awareness to that of Lucy Mallory (Louise Platt) during the Apache attack in *Stagecoach*. Mrs Mallory is tearfully praying, her eyes pointed up and to the right, as the gun held by Major Hatfield (John Carradine) creeps into the shot from the left [see *Illustrations, Fig. 1.6*]. Before he can pull the trigger, Hatfield is shot by an Indian, but Mrs Mallory remains apparently unaware of how close she came to being killed. The understanding of violence that Lola is shown to have allows her character to challenge a number of conventional expectations regarding heroines in Westerns. Later in the movie, as Lin is about to confront Waco Johnny Dean (Dan Duryea) in the saloon in Tascosa, Lola grabs his arm and stops him for a moment. What we might conventionally expect to follow would be Lola pleading with Lin not to risk his life tangling with a psychopath like Dean. Instead, however, she offers tactical guidance: “Lin, watch his left hand.”

That a certain attitude to violence is what connects Lin and Lola is made clear by her saving the last bullet after the Sioux attack, not as an emergency contingency, but as a keepsake. She asks if she can keep it when she returns Lin’s six-gun, saying that “You just never know when a girl might need



a bullet.” This phrase conveys both practicality and sentiment. It hints at both the likelihood of future violence (the world has not changed) and at a continuing bond between her and Lin. The bullet becomes a significant object for Lola. It stands for both the continuing threat of violence and the possibility of survival, her connection to Lin and its limited prospects for development (when Lola takes the bullet, Lin is still obsessively focused on retrieving the Winchester and avenging his father’s death, while she is coming to terms with having chosen Steve, the wrong man, to settle down with). In its intense and complex emotional resonance, it is an exemplary melancholy object.

Later, when Steve has been killed by Waco Johnny Dean and Dean has forced her into what Kitses calls “a grotesque love relationship”<sup>37</sup> with him, Lola takes comfort in the bullet. She stands on the porch of the run-down shack where Dean has met up with Dutch Henry and his gang, tossing the bullet up in the air and catching it much like George Raft flipping a coin, feeling its weight and shape as it lands back into her hand. The film emphasises the material character of objects – Kitses describes Mann’s style as “distinctively physical”<sup>38</sup>. The gun at the centre of the narrative is often photographed in depth and at a diagonal, in such a way as displays its three-dimensional shape and the play of light on its surfaces. The bullet is smaller and more personal, but some sense of its physical substance is still important, because it gives Lola something solid and concrete to cling onto, to connect her tribulations to something permanent and meaningful. Like her bullet, Lola acknowledges the violence of the world but manages to endure despite this. Thus, when Lin and Lola embrace at the end of the movie, his mission fulfilled

and her succession of wrong men dispensed with, it is in the most positive way that the logic of the movie will allow, as survivors. The final shot shows the scuffs and scratches on the once-pristine stock and still-blank nameplate of the recovered Winchester '73 [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 1.7]. It is permanently marked by violence, but retains its coherent form.

### The Justifying Outrage

The Westerns of Anthony Mann are perhaps an extreme example within my period in terms of their representation of the world as inherently violent. Mann's interest in stories inclined towards tragedy<sup>39</sup> required that his movies be set in an environment characterised by fatalism and cruel irony. But the Western genre still provided him the best opportunity to achieve these effects. As Kitses suggests, Mann was able to evoke the tragic by engaging with and amplifying themes and tropes that were already a part of the genre<sup>40</sup>. Moments that reveal the world as inescapably violent, and in doing so, provoke a sense of melancholy, can be seen in a large number of other Westerns. These moments are often used as a turning point in the narrative, after which it becomes necessary for the hero to respond with violence of his own. Tompkins refers to the scene in *Shane* where Shane (Alan Ladd), having spent some time ignoring the insults and physical aggression of the cattlemen in the town's saloon, is finally provoked into a barroom brawl:

The structure of this sequence reproduces itself in a thousand Western novels and movies. Its pattern never varies. The hero, provoked by insults, first verbal, then physical, resists the urge to retaliate, proving his moral superiority to those who are taunting him. It is never the hero who taunts his adversary; if he does, it is only after he's been pushed

“too far.” And that, of course, is what always happens. The villains, whoever they may be, finally commit an act so atrocious that the hero *must* retaliate in kind. He wants to, and we want him to, and, if there’s a crowd of innocent bystanders, they want him to, too. At this juncture, the point where provocation has gone too far, retaliatory violence becomes not simply justifiable but imperative: now, we are made to feel, *not* to transgress the interdict against violence would be the transgression.<sup>41</sup>

Although Tompkins’ claim that the “pattern never varies” is something of an overstatement, it is still striking how often the plot of a Western will pivot on a moment which makes violence seem unavoidable. Although, as Tompkins points out, this usually consists of some particularly egregious act on the part of the villains, it still often functions as an assertion of the inevitability of violence in the film’s world. Faced with this melancholy realisation, the hero is left with no option but to try to ensure that this violence is directed in the service of good.

In order to establish such a scenario effectively, the provocation must be severe enough to assert both the pervasive power of violence and the necessity of responsive action. Tompkins argues that this combination results in “a moment of moral ecstasy. The hero is so *right* (that is, so wronged) that he can kill with impunity.”<sup>42</sup> Once the worst has happened (not necessarily, as Tompkins seems to imply, to the hero himself, frequently to the settlers or townsfolk he defends), the controlled violence of the hero seems positive by comparison. This trope, which I would like to call the *justifying outrage*, obviously presents many opportunities for abuse – its force and apparent moral clarity can be used to obscure other issues and problems (Fraser makes a similar point to this in relation to the treatment of Indians in

Westerns<sup>43</sup>). Tompkins stops just short of moral condemnation<sup>44</sup> (on this issue, at least), but still treats the genre as an apologia for violence<sup>45</sup>. However, as I have already argued, violence and its consequences are never totally contained by purposes and justifications. The justifying outrage may set the stage for satisfying, meaningful violence, but it also leaves its own mark on us. In its irrevocable brutality, it can be avenged or responded to, but not undone. If the outrage is rendered vividly enough, its effect can endure in our experience of the movie, as a melancholy dimension that stands apart from the purposeful violence that follows.

The justifying outrage in *Dodge City* (Michael Curtiz, Warner Brothers, USA, 1939) is the death of Harry Cole (Bobs Watson), a child who is dragged behind a team of horses who have been startled by gunfire. His death convinces Wade Hatton (Errol Flynn) to accept the position of sheriff of Dodge City, a job offer he had previously declined in favour of the freer, more mobile world of the cattle drive. Hatton's decision is shown to be motivated by the shocking nature of Harry's death. Looking down at the dead boy, he says "Children. This has got to stop." The camera moves from Hatton's face down to Harry, who is being kissed by his anguished mother (Gloria Holden), and then tracks in on the paper sheriff's badge we have seen the boy wearing, now torn and crumpled. A dissolve then takes us from this make-believe badge to the real thing, an actual tin star that a camera movement back up and out reveals to be attached to Hatton's gunbelt.

In this way, the significance of the death is immediately established. Like a number of the moments of violence that I have been looking at, it is an assertion of seriousness. It demonstrates what is possible in the world of the film and invites both the audience and the characters to appreciate the gravity of the situation that is being faced. The most obvious factor in this is the choice of victim. As Fraser notes,

...there are also, as I have said, a number of people whom one normally does not expect to become victims at all, and hence a number of violences that are likely to seem eminently unnatural. Gentle old priests, loving mothers, happy newly-weds, innocent children, and so on – the list can be considerably extended...<sup>46</sup>

We tend to regard children in movies as protected by convention from serious harm. There are, of course, circumstances in studio-era Hollywood where child characters can die. They can, for example, die of an illness in melodramas like *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, Warner Brothers, USA, 1945) and *Penny Serenade* (George Stevens, Columbia, USA, 1941). In cases like these, however, the film is much less constrained with what it can show than it would be if the child were dying violently. A child's death in a movie from this period can be violent if, say, they belong to a family massacred by Indians in a Western, but this would usually take place offscreen. In contrast, the sudden and physically nasty character of Harry's death in *Dodge City*, and the emphasis with which it is treated, give it a shocking, taboo quality. Hatton's reaction to it mirrors our own sense that a line has been crossed, that disturbing possibilities have been revealed that we might otherwise have been able to dismiss.

A related way in which Harry's death works to establish seriousness is by reaffirming the film's standards of personal and generic authenticity. His paper sheriff's badge represents a playful relation to violence, a dangerous lack of understanding of what is at stake. Slotkin argues that the badge "confronts Hatton with the image of his own childishness, his adherence to a primitive and infantile notion of freedom."<sup>47</sup> In terms of the responsibility that Hatton first refuses and then accepts, this is certainly a valid interpretation. But the "childishness" of Harry's badge also has other implications. It forms part of the outfit we see Harry wearing several times in the movie, along with an oversized neckerchief, a gunbelt and a toy gun. Although his clothes are Western in style anyway (because the film is a Western), we understand these elements as separate from this, part of a child's fancy dress costume. Thus, the film gives us both a Western *mise-en-scène* that we are asked to accept as (at least generically) authentic, and Harry's "sheriff" outfit, which is shown to be artificial.

This serves to remind us that Harry regards much of what he does as play. After his father (John Litel) is murdered by Jeff Surrect (Bruce Cabot) and his henchmen early in the movie, Harry becomes "the man of the family" and goes to work holding horses in the street. This becomes a kind of game, with him pointing his toy gun at Hatton to get him to pay up, and Hatton indulging him and playing along. The second time this happens is as a make-believe hold-up [see *Illustrations, Fig. 1.8*], with Harry covering his face with his neckerchief and referring to himself as "a pretty desperate character" (it is a neat evocation of children's games that, despite his sheriff's badge, Harry can

be an outlaw when the mood takes him). With his home-made costume and his repertoire of stock phrases ("stick 'em up" etc), it is as if he were not only a resident of the Old West but also a fan of Western movies<sup>48</sup>. He seems to treat the violence of the West as entertainment rather than reality. In this respect, he resembles the young boys of the town of Cayenne in *The Gunfighter*, who all play truant from school in order to gawp at Jimmy Ringo and stand in the main street arguing about whether or not he is tougher than Wyatt Earp. Both films contrast a stereotypical image of the young male audience associated with Westerns with concerns that are presented as more serious and that the children do not comprehend. In this way, the movies seek to distinguish themselves from other (implicitly more frivolous) Westerns, in terms of greater authenticity and gravitas. As an important film in the revival of higher-budget, more prestigious Westerns in 1939<sup>49</sup>, this was a distinction that *Dodge City* was perhaps obliged to establish.

This is not to say that, by killing Harry, the film condemns him simply for being a child who likes to play. But I would argue that we are encouraged to regard Harry's attitude as fatally out of step with his environment. This is demonstrated early in the film, in the scenes leading up to his father's murder. Matt Cole, accompanied by his son, goes to the stockyards to demand prompt payment from Surrett of the \$15,000 he owes him for his cattle. As they are leaving, Matt instructs Harry in the importance of dealing firmly with "men like that". Harry cheerfully brandishes his toy gun and insists, in an imitation of a tough-guy drawl, that "we can handle 'em." The film then dissolves to a shot of the outside of Surrett's Gay Lady Saloon that evening. Matt rides up, with

Harry still in tow, and goes inside to claim his money, leaving the boy with the horses. While in the saloon, he is killed by Yancey (Victor Jory) on Surrect's instructions. Before his father enters the saloon, Harry tells him to "get all that's coming to us." In these two brief scenes, Harry refers to or unwittingly evokes violence, without really understanding its implications. From very early on, then, our attention is drawn to the disjunction between the world as it is and his childish view of it. He is framed in this way as a figure of pathos. This can also be seen in the casting of Bobs Watson as Harry. Watson was a child actor who was primarily known for being able to cry freely and convincingly on demand<sup>50</sup>, a skill that the movie displays at Harry's father's funeral. He was cast in the movie as a performer that brings the possibility, even the likelihood, of tears with him, and this affects our understanding of even his cheerful scenes.

The film uses the child's death to demonstrate that the situation in Dodge City requires the intervention of someone who takes violence seriously and knows that it is not a game (i.e. Hatton). However, it does also treat with some regret the fact that its world is too harsh to accommodate Harry's playfulness. Our sense of the wrongness of this situation is part of what makes his death a justifying outrage, a symptom of something that urgently needs to be put right. In this respect, it is important that the cruelty we are responding to should once again seem to have arisen out of the environment itself, rather than the actions of any particular individual. Harry's death is the logical, if tragic, consequence of the eruption of anonymous violent energy in the streets of Dodge City. Abbie Irving (Olivia de Havilland) is taking Harry and some other



children on a Sunday school picnic when the wagon they are riding in blunders into the middle of a gunfight. Panicked by the noise, the horses start to buck and pull away, and Harry comes forward to help Abbie by taking hold of the reins. We see the clamps that hold the harnesses to the wagon's axle strain, and then break off, and Harry is dragged through the streets until Hatton can catch the horses and ride them to a stop.

There are several significant aspects to how these events are presented. The gunfight involves no named characters from the film, just two groups of extras firing at each other from either side of the street. This staging is itself a notable feature. It distinguishes the gunfight from the archetypal Western face-off, which takes place in the street and so establishes a clear division between the participants in the middle and the bystanders at the periphery. There is no such separation in this particular fight, which invades the public peace of a Sunday morning and generates a crossfire for anyone in the street to stray into.

This can be seen as part of the film's insistence on placing its events in a social context. As part of Warner Brothers' courting of prestige for the movie (Slotkin refers to the historical pageantry that accompanied the film's premiere in the modern-day Dodge City<sup>51</sup>) *Dodge City* emphasises a sense of progress, and the importance of establishing law and order so that society can prosper and thrive. Charles Barr argues that with its self-conscious amplification of such themes, the film exemplifies the dominant critical conception of what Westerns are about<sup>52</sup> (or at least what they are *supposed* to be about).

Stanfield remarks that the movie is “obsessed with the plight of the middle classes (the film is full of Victorian parlours, old men and old maids).”<sup>53</sup>

In this overall context, it is important that the gunfight in the streets should be both an anonymous explosion of violence and something that threatens and compromises public space. If Harry’s death had been a direct consequence of the cruelty of a villain such as Surrett then responding to it would be a private matter, one of revenge. The pursuit of revenge is bound up in the personal – it demands the suspension of wider connections and concerns<sup>54</sup> in the service of its goal, which is usually motivated by a personal loss or offence. Hence, the couple in *Winchester ’73* can only be properly united at the end of the movie, when all of Lin McAdam’s other business has been concluded. The causes of Harry’s death, though, are portrayed as impersonal, even inhuman. The shots of the horses straining at their harness and then tearing away emphasise the sense of animal energies breaking out of control. It is significant that the other death of a boy in the movie, that of Abbie’s wayward brother Lee (William Lundigan), occurs during a cattle stampede. Rather than punishing guilty individuals (although this, too, will have its place), the issue becomes containing and controlling the “natural” violence that erupts out of the world, and minimising its impact on society, on the domain of women and children.

The same impersonal effect can sometimes be achieved even when the violence is intentional. The justifying outrage in *The Westerner* (William Wyler, The Samuel Goldwyn Company, USA, 1940) seems to work in this

way. The action of the movie takes place in the familiar context of the clash between cattlemen and homesteaders. Hanging Judge Roy Bean (Walter Brennan), who represents the cattle interests, orders the burning of the settlers' crops and houses. As with *Dodge City*, though, the main impression is less of human agency than of chaotic, uncontrolled force. This is primarily achieved by the scale of the fire, but there is also something impersonal about fire itself, an element of the natural disaster even to fires that have been intentionally set. Stanfield refers to "the apocalyptic vision that Gregg Toland's camera creates"<sup>55</sup> in these scenes. The whole settlement is consumed with flames and black smoke, and the scene goes on for longer than we might expect, emphasising the extent of the damage. The previous scenes had shown the homesteaders celebrating the establishing of their community and the growth of their crops, praying in front of the cornstalks bathed in heavenly light. The contrast increases the sense of devastation beyond human control. Although we see Bean's henchman, Chickenfoot (Paul Hurst), a couple of times (in order to direct our suspicions back to the Judge), most of the other cattlemen involved are undifferentiated as characters, appearing only as masked riders or silhouettes. We do not know for certain that Bean was responsible until Cole Harden (Gary Cooper) makes him admit it a few scenes later. But still, Bean appears somewhat detached from the havoc wreaked by the fire. Even in his despotic administration of the "Law West of the Pecos", he is not entirely convincing as the source of so much destruction (although a villain of sorts, he remains Walter Brennan – slight, gnarled and comical). Again, the consequences of violence seem to exceed the intentions that motivate it, creating a melancholy imbalance

between the outrage and the conflict it emerged out of. As Bean himself says, “A fire don’t need nothing behind it. A fire has a way of moving, all its own.”

This chaotic, impersonal, public violence engenders the same sort of controlled, official response as it does in *Dodge City*. Like Wade Hatton (and indeed like Steve Farrell in *Colt .45*), Cole Harden puts on a tin star to legitimate the action he takes. Harden rides to Fort Davis, obtains a warrant for Bean’s arrest and is sworn in as a deputy. His subsequent confrontation with the Judge is presented as a mixture of personal dispute and public display. The public dimension is emphasised by the setting – it takes place in the Grand Opera House theatre in Fort Davis, where Lily Langtry (Lillian Bond) is meant to be performing. Instead of the famous actress, it is Harden who appears when the curtain comes up, framing the climactic fight as a kind of performance, the enactment of a public role. But it is also a private performance – the Judge, who is obsessed with Langtry, has bought out the whole house, so the two men shoot it out in an empty theatre. This puts the emphasis onto the personal relationship between Harden and Bean, which has combined friendliness and underlying threat, deception and mutual understanding. What we end up with is a violent confrontation whose public and private aspects give it an intense and concentrated significance. It takes on an almost ritual quality, which helps it correct the melancholy imbalance that I mentioned, the sense of waste and excess. In contrast to the fire, this violence is focused and meaningful. And a significant part of this is that the setting, the narrative circumstances and the stature of the characters

(Cooper's classically styled hero and Brennan's vividly eccentric villain) make the fight seem like a unique and extraordinary occurrence.

### Violence, Genre and Tone

At this point, I would like to return to Harry's death in *Dodge City*, and draw attention to another notable aspect of its presentation which is relevant to my line of argument. Somewhat unusually, we have seen part of the scene before. Early on in the film, we see a montage demonstrating the lawlessness and chaos that has developed in Dodge City, in contrast to the optimistic boosterism of its founding (Slotkin likens the rhetoric of the early part of the film to "a history textbook"<sup>56</sup>). After a couple of title cards proclaiming Dodge the "wide-open Babylon of the American frontier" and "the town that knew no ethics but cash and killing", the montage begins. We see shooting in the streets, gambling, saloons, a lynching, the closing of the sheriff's office and the massed herds of cattle in the stockyards. In amongst these images of violence and excess, there is a shot of a wagon full of women and children riding into the crossfire of a gunfight [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 1.9]. When it comes in the montage, we have as yet no other context in which to understand it. Retrospectively, however, it is recognisable as the Sunday School outing from later in the movie. Although the exact shot is not replicated in the later scene, it is clearly the same wagon (as indicated by Abbie's distinctive blue bonnet in the front and the straw boater worn by one of the children in the back) in the same situation.

I do not want to claim a much deeper impulse behind this than the economical use of available footage, but I would argue that it does make the scene feel a little more familiar when it comes around. It puts the Sunday School picnic's encounter with violence in the context of business as usual in *Dodge City*. Harry's death, then, is the result of normal events taken to their tragic, but logical, conclusion. It is presented to us as obscene, but ordinary, senseless, but almost predictable. In contrast to the climax of *The Westerner*, there seems to be nothing special about this violence – it develops all too easily out of the everyday. Barr observes that the scene seems to promise and then frustrate the possibility of meaningful heroic action: “even Hatton's athletic dash to the rescue – at last, a moment of real action for Flynn – cannot prevent a young boy being dragged to his death.”<sup>57</sup>

Barr's remarks hint at a wider disjunction in the movie, relating to genre and tone. On the one hand, *Dodge City* is an action movie, evidently conceived, as Barr notes<sup>58</sup>, as a novel variation on the Errol Flynn swashbuckler. It also borrows from a variety of other action genres, including (as Slotkin argues<sup>59</sup>) the gangster film, as well as the detective film and the adventure serial. These can be seen in such elements as the interrogation of Bud Taylor (Ward Bond), the investigation of the murder of Joe Clemens (Frank McHugh) and the scene near the end where Hatton, Abbie and Rusty Hart (Alan Hale) are locked in the burning mail car of a moving train. On the other hand, the movie also insists on the seriousness of its world, asserting the pervasive presence of violence as both a natural phenomenon and a social issue (it seems as if every character in the film contributes to this debate in one way or another).

This side of the film seems to come mostly from the ways in which it sets itself up as, historically and iconographically, a Western.

The resulting mixture is a jaunty film in which horrible things happen. Part of Flynn's star persona is a sense of physical ease – a ready capacity for action that was not only effective but enjoyable. As Stanley Cavell remarks, "The old swashbucklers – Douglas Fairbanks, Errol Flynn – laughed out of confidence and pleasure at their abilities"<sup>60</sup>. Although Hatton does become a figure of meaningful (and socially-sanctioned) violence in the movie, he does not do so in a world that permits the same level of hearty self-assurance. He is confronted more often with the limitations of his power and control. He is forced to shoot Lee Irving in the leg when the young man fires at him repeatedly and causes a cattle stampede, and he cannot save the immobilised Lee from being trampled. Likewise, despite the spectacular stunt work mentioned by Barr, his intervention comes too late to prevent Harry's death. The doubt and uncertainty expressed in these moments jar somewhat with the overall tone of the movie, and the expectations generated by a movie made at Warner Brothers with many of the same personnel involved in the swashbucklers (Curtiz, cinematographer Sol Polito *et al*) and featuring the familiar star couple of Flynn and de Havilland. Thus, the film arrives at a kind of melancholy as the tension between these conflicting aspects is never quite resolved. It is perhaps only a side-effect of an uneasy generic mix, but it still makes for a complex and interesting experience.

One reason why aspects of the violence in *Dodge City*, particularly the deaths of Lee and Harry, seem to stand apart from the rest of the movie is that the narrative of the film does not resolve in a way that properly incorporates them. Although Hatton cleans up the town and Abbie eventually forgives him for causing her brother's death, the main conflict once Hatton becomes sheriff is with Surrect and his gang. Neither of the boys' deaths plays an important part in this. Indeed, it would be difficult to see how they could feature significantly in the process of bringing the film to a satisfying conclusion. Surrect is not involved in either death and, even if he was, it would be problematic to have Hatton avenge what are, in essence, violent accidents. What this does mean, though, is that the film resolves the issue of violence in a rather selective fashion. It does not confront all of its implications with the directness promised when Hatton responds to Harry's death by putting on the sheriff's star.

The act of adopting the tin star addresses violence by redefining it in terms of its social purpose. Violence becomes something to be employed or restricted in whichever way best serves or protects society. This approach plays down the more chaotic and emotional sides to violence that stubbornly persist in the parts of *Dodge City* that I have looked at. To see these aspects of violence confronted more directly I will need to return to another of its emblems, the gun. I have already discussed two movies concerned with the retrieval of particular guns. I would now like to look at two instances of a distinct but related motif: the moment when a hero, whom we have seen up to this point without a gun, picks one up again.



### Picking up Guns

This happens near the end of *Destry Rides Again* and early on in *The Return of Frank James* (Fritz Lang, Twentieth Century-Fox, USA, 1940). In both cases the heroes are prompted to return to their guns by something that could be classed as a justifying outrage. For Thomas Jefferson Destry Junior (James Stewart), it is the murder of Wash Dimsdale (Charles Winninger), the sheriff who brought him out to the town of Bottleneck as a deputy. For Frank James (Henry Fonda), it is the pardon issued to Bob and Charlie Ford (John Carradine and Charles Tannen) after they are convicted of murdering his brother, the famous outlaw Jesse James. This gives both of these returns to violence a quality of desperate necessity, a sense that all other options have been exhausted, which is treated with a degree of melancholy fatalism. Both are prompted by that classic vigilante motive, the failure of institutional justice. In *Frank James*, Frank puts his faith in the courts to punish the Fords for their crime, only to read about their pardon in the newspaper. In *Destry*, Wash is shot while guarding the town jail, where Gyp Watson (Allen Jenkins) is being held awaiting the arrival of an impartial judge not connected to the corrupt local interests that Gyp serves.

In both movies, the picking up of the gun indicates a change in the hero's relationship to violence. It is a return to direct, physical action after some time spent treating it more obliquely. Tom Destry's characteristic approach is to speak in parables, little comic tales about people he allegedly used to know. These stories usually involve violence, and their comedy often comes from

the disparity between its serious consequences and a ridiculous or trivial situation. They include the story of the man who shot himself in the foot in bed, believing it to be the hand of a mysterious assailant and the child who beat his parents to death and then asked the judge to have “some regard for the feelings of a poor orphan.” Florence Jacobowitz calls these stories “didactic” and takes them to be a sign of Destry’s “passivity”<sup>61</sup>. They certainly seem intended to edify and instruct by advancing a particular view of violence. Through his stories, Destry attempts to establish a certain comic distance from violence, to illustrate its absurd excesses and make it seem less natural or inevitable.

Frank James is also detached from the violence of his brother’s killing, although out of necessity rather than choice. As a wanted man himself, he is living as a farmer under the alias Ben Woodson. Everything he knows about Jesse’s death and the fate of the Fords he finds out second-hand, from Clem (Jackie Cooper), the young man who helps him on his farm, from a travelling preacher (Victor Kilian) and from the newspaper. At this substantial remove, the situation initially looks like it will be resolved without Frank having to risk exposing himself by intervening. Because Jesse was shot in the back, the Ford brothers seem certain to be convicted and hung: “Whatever Jesse done, he was murdered. And the law don’t hold with murder.”

But violence invades the sheriff’s office in Bottleneck and goes unpunished in Missouri, so Destry and James must confront it more directly. This directness is also necessitated by the kind of violence they are responding to. Both

Wash Dimsdale and Jesse James are shot in the back. Back-shooting, which I will return to in the next chapter, is the most iconic form of illegitimate violence in Westerns. In its refusal of direct confrontation, of the convention of the fair fight, it is a source of public shame for both its perpetrator and its victim. In this respect, Yvonne Tasker likens it to a sexual violation<sup>62</sup>. One of the things we see both James and Destry do is reject the notion that any shame should be attached to the victims, reinterpreting the manner of their death as an indication that they were too formidable to face. With Jesse James, this may have been true. With Wash, the diminutive, grey-haired former town drunk, it seems less plausible, but Destry insists on it, connecting the dying man to his father, Thomas Destry Senior, a famous sheriff who was killed in the same way. The effect of this in both cases is to establish a standard of directness in violence that the two heroes must uphold. They are obliged to demonstrate the moral superiority of their mode of violence, in contrast to their back-shooting adversaries.

And so, they return to their guns. In doing so, and by wearing the guns thereafter, they affirm, even advertise, the necessity of violence. As Warshow says of the Western hero, "The gun tells us that he lives in a world of violence, and even that he "believes in violence.""<sup>63</sup> Wearing a gun, displayed in its holster in plain view, is an open acknowledgement of the possibility of violence arising at any time. Destry acknowledges the implications of this early on in his film, when he explains to Kent (Brian Donlevy), the main villain, that he does not carry a gun because that would mean accepting the possibility of minor incidents escalating into violence. Kent treats this as a

joke: “Folks, seems like we’ve got a deputy that knows what’s good for him. If he don’t carry a gun he can’t get into any trouble.” But this is more or less Destry’s position, until he is faced with violence that he cannot prevent. Finally, and with the melancholy that comes with such a recognition, he accepts the violence of his surroundings and responds in kind.

Because it represents a crucial shift in attitude, and the adoption of what is in some respects quite a bleak viewpoint, the act of taking up the guns is treated with some emotional emphasis. In *Frank James*, this is done through editing and sound. We see Frank reach into a grain bin and pull out a bundle buried there. At this point Clem, who has been complaining about poor people’s access to justice, falls silent. The film then cuts to a close shot of the bundle in Frank’s hands, accompanied by a little musical fanfare. As we see him unwrap it, revealing a gun in a holster [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 1.10], the background music swells into a loud chord, with the string section playing tremolo to intensify the effect. The chord dies away once the shot has finished. In *Destry*, similar musical devices are used – again, we hear tremolo strings and a rise in volume, although this time the music is more rapid and intricate – but the visual emphasis is mainly conveyed through Stewart’s performance. He seems calm when he opens his wardrobe door and takes his father’s gunbelt down from a coat hook, but then he throws the belt around his waist and yanks it tight. The sudden shift in physical intensity – away from the loose-limbed geniality that has characterised Destry up to this point – indicates the significance of the change being registered.

Much of the emphasis in both instances also comes from context. We understand that picking up a gun constitutes a fundamental shift in Destry's behaviour because we have seen him without one for so long. The shock of the outrage that drives him back to violence is also reinforced by its contrast to the comedic tone of most of the movie. When Frank James is introduced to us, the emphasis is on his attempts to live a life of humble anonymity. This is disrupted by the action he is compelled to take against the Fords. Returning to the guns is also given specific resonances by the two characters' personal histories. As I argued earlier in relation to *Colt .45*, the guns in these movies can be said to provide a connection to the past. In both, the past is characterised in terms of violence and family. Both heroes were successful men of violence who worked alongside a close male relative – Frank with Jesse in the famous James Gang, Destry with his father, cleaning up the town of Tombstone. Our sense of the importance of this past is particularly pronounced in *Frank James*, because it is a sequel. Frank is a supporting character in *Jesse James* (Henry King, Twentieth Century-Fox, USA, 1939), so there is a good chance that we will come to the sequel having actually seen some of his violent past in the previous movie. In *Destry*, we only know about Destry's background from what he and Wash have occasion to mention, but its significance is continually reasserted by the hero's refusal of violence, which we understand to be connected to his father's death. *Destry* is not a sequel, but its title, with its evocation of a return to a characteristically Western action, almost suggests that it could be. The emphasis in both movies is on the resumption of violence – both protagonists revert to a previous state embodied by their guns.

As a means of accessing and relating to the past, the guns have a classically melancholy resonance. In the face of the losses that disconnect the characters from their past – the deaths of Jesse James and Destry Senior – and the further losses that force them to confront it – the pardoning of the Fords and the death of Wash – the guns offer a sense of continuity. As objects of unique character and significance, they represent a tangible connection to that which has been lost. The power of these guns to evoke the past is demonstrated during the trial of Frank James when Frank's friend and lawyer Major Rufus Cobb (Henry Hull) presents Frank's gun as evidence. Cobb uses the gun as a sort of character witness, to represent Frank's violent background in a way that the jury can find legitimate and acceptable. Specifically, the gun is used to illustrate Frank's military record, fighting on the Confederate side in the Civil War. Both the judge and the jury are presented as partisan Southerners – some of the jurors are shown to have a personal stake in the battles that Cobb refers to, and it is largely for these reasons that Frank is eventually acquitted. It is the capacity of the gun to act as a concrete representation of the past that allows him to gain the upper hand in the trial.

Another aspect of the guns that points to the enduring power of the past in the present is the ease with which they are retrieved. In both films, the guns are hidden out of sight, but kept somewhere close and readily available, as if in tacit acknowledgement of the likelihood of renewed violence. For all its portentous weight, the return to the world of violence is quick and easy. This is partly because violence in Westerns is the more expected, the more "natural" state. Referring in passing to *Destry*, Warshow suggests that,

One does not want too much novelty: it comes as a shock, for instance, when the hero is made to operate without a gun, as has been done in several pictures (e.g., *Destry Rides Again*), and our uneasiness is allayed only when he is finally compelled to put his “pacifism” aside.<sup>64</sup>

Tompkins, as I have already mentioned, argues that part of what we in the audience (she explicitly includes herself in this) want from a Western is violence that we are able to understand and support. She presents this as an almost physical compulsion: “the violence, by the time it arrives, fills a visceral need.”<sup>65</sup> Certainly, the moments in the two movies where the heroes pick up their guns are offered to us as satisfying. Both moments mark the beginning of action, the point at which something meaningful and substantial promises to unfold (the satisfaction in this, of course, depends on our confidence, based on what we know about the characters and what we expect from the stars, that the heroes will be able to use their guns effectively). In *Destry*, it signals the beginning of the film’s climactic scenes. In *Frank James*, it is the moment when Frank embarks on his pursuit of just revenge. By putting on their guns, the two heroes give us what we want – a figure of justified and purposeful violence.

At the same time, however, there is also a sense in which this return to violence is experienced as a kind of surrender, even defeat. In both films, but particularly in *Destry*, we have seen considerable effort and intelligence invested in avoiding and preventing violence. Part of Tom Destry’s appeal is the wit and ingenuity with which he does this for much of the movie, and the comedy that this play with generic expectations generates. It is important, of course, that we know he is capable of violence – he demonstrates his

shooting skills in a brief scene midway through the movie. But, in a town in which the standard expression of enthusiasm is to fire a gun into the air, he is a more distinctive figure when unarmed. He assumes the mantle of the conventional hero at the end of the movie, but at some cost to his integrity.

The same could be said for Frank James. His pursuit of vengeance also necessitates taking up robbery again, in order to fund his mission. In a scene at Jesse's grave, Frank shifts in a matter of seconds from telling Pinky (Ernest Whitman), his black servant, that "them days is far behind me" to justifying robbing the St. Louis Midland Railway office because the company's money paid for his brother's assassination. Pinky, who is generally treated with racist condescension in the two James brothers movies, is nonetheless briefly allowed to register his disappointment with a sorrowful, "Oh, Mr. Frank." Although, in the context of the film's populist support of the working class outlaw against the corrupt financial power of the railroad,<sup>66</sup> Frank's return to crime is not a major transgression, it is still presented ambivalently. The night-time robbery is shot in a sinister, almost expressionistic style, with the lamp in the office throwing large, distorted shadows onto the wall behind. Frank remains calm and focused, and does no serious harm to anyone, but the situation still gets out of control. A stray bullet from the local law enforcement kills the station agent (Eddie Collins) and Frank is later tried for his murder.

A more positive form of chaos erupts at the climax of *Destry* – as a comedy, there is more scope for portraying it in this way – when Destry surrenders his



control and accepts violence again. The good townspeople of Bottleneck rise up behind him – the men back him up with gunfire and the women storm Kent's saloon, beating the villains down with hoes, rolling pins and other emblems of agrarian domesticity. Although this is a positive development for the town in that it shows its people actively establishing a more just and peaceful society, it also diminishes the possibility for meaningful individual action. Destry enters the fray in spectacular and daring fashion, hanging off the side of his horse to throw dynamite into the saloon, then climbing up and entering through a first floor window. But he ends up struggling through the crowd that fills the saloon, unable to move freely or take decisive action. Also trapped in the throng is Frenchy (Marlene Dietrich), the singer who brings the women into the action. As Jacobowitz argues, "Logic would have Frenchy lead this rebellion,"<sup>67</sup> but the film's other main character and major star (given equal billing with Stewart in the opening titles, and listed above him at the end) is pushed back by the crowd as well. The movie's most prominent individuals have little or no control over the situation – Destry loses Kent in the chaos, and Frenchy is unable to get close enough to Destry to warn him that Kent is in the gallery above with a rifle. Destry is finally able to shoot Kent, but only after Frenchy stops a bullet meant for him. In his long-anticipated shoot-out with Kent, then, Destry almost seems more passive than he did without a gun. He is swept along by the whole situation, and the scene ends with a close-up of him in silent shock at Frenchy's death [see *Illustrations, Fig. 1.11*]. When violence is finally unleashed in the movie, it transforms society at the expense of the individual. The loss of Frenchy, although generically unsurprising (the "bad" woman taking a bullet for the hero)<sup>68</sup>, is still strongly

felt, in the light of what Robin Wood calls the film's "celebration" of her "uninhibited exuberance and energy"<sup>69</sup>. In the epilogue section in the cleaned-up *Bottleneck*, a group of children singing 'Little Joe', which Frenchy and Wash performed early in the movie, provokes a moment of wistful contemplation for Destry. He listens to the song in medium close-up, first smiling and then hanging his head [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 1.12]. The losses he acknowledges in this moment bring a small amount of melancholy into the film's otherwise affirmative ending.

The loss of control entailed in the embracing of violence is examined at greater length in *Frank James*. Although Frank's revenge is by definition a personal matter, it is represented almost as an external force, acting on both the Fords and on Frank himself. It seems as much a product of the fatalism associated with the movies of Fritz Lang<sup>70</sup> as any cause within the narrative itself. This can be seen in the deaths of the Ford brothers. Frank chases Charlie Ford high up a rock formation in the Colorado wilderness. Frank keeps advancing and Charlie keeps retreating until he reaches the edge, where he uses the curved surface of the rock for cover. The two men exchange fire without hitting each other until Charlie runs out of bullets. At this point, he simply slips off his ridge and falls to his death into the river below. Nothing that Frank actually does causes him to fall, but it is as if Frank's sheer force of purpose pushes Charlie off the edge.

Similarly, when he confronts Bob Ford at the end of the movie, Frank does not fire a single shot. Bob and Clem shoot each other offscreen, outside the

courthouse where Frank's trial has been taking place. By the time Frank gets out to where the shots came from, Clem is dying and Bob has retreated into a livery barn. Frank corners him inside, and we see that Bob is bleeding. Frank pursues him up into the loft, but Bob dies of his wounds just as he reaches him. Frank's role in both the Ford brothers' deaths is oddly passive. Neither of them dies as a direct result of his action. His presence gives their deaths significance, it makes them count as retribution for killing Jesse (Frank marks each death by speaking to his dead brother), but he does not kill them. The means by which they die are outside of Frank's control – they serve his purposes but do not result from his intentions.

This could perhaps be interpreted as a moral dodge, a way for the film to satisfy Frank's quest for revenge without giving its hero the taint of a killer. Certainly, the fact that Frank does not actually shoot Bob himself is convenient for the narrative, since as Eleanor Stone (Gene Tierney) points out, he has just been acquitted of murder and would have to go through the whole process again. It also helps distance the character from the doomed outlaw type embodied by Jesse James (Tyrone Power) in the previous film. If Frank's pursuit of revenge followed too similar a trajectory to his brother's criminal career, characterised by increasing violence, estrangement from the law and "isolation from the community"<sup>71</sup>, then convention would require him to die at the end of the film. He would be too close to the excesses of the gangster movie protagonist (Slotkin makes this connection in relation to *Jesse James*<sup>72</sup>) to avoid their tragic consequences. Although he does end up a solitary, even isolated figure – Clem dies, and the romantic pairing of Frank

and Eleanor that the film repeatedly suggests never actually materialises – the reduced intensity and explicitness of his outlaw activities allow him to be presented as a more conventional hero. Slotkin compares Frank to his brother in these terms:

Where Tyrone Power's Jesse swung from the romantic heights to the megalomaniacal depths, Fonda projected an alternative vision of a populist outlaw who has achieved emotional and moral stability.<sup>73</sup>

However, if Frank's somewhat unusual relationship to his revenge makes him a less problematic hero in a broad, structural sense, it also makes our experience of him more complicated. We still understand and acknowledge the Fords' deaths as revenge, as Frank does, but his carefully circumscribed role in them adds a dimension of strangeness. The tension between the fatal inevitability of Frank's revenge and the indirect causality with which it is achieved creates an effect that is genuinely uncanny.

### Monstrosity and Melancholy

There is, in fact, a pervasive sense of the supernatural to the film's presentation of Frank's vendetta. It is hard to understand Charlie Ford's sudden, unprovoked fall in any other way. The pattern of both the death scenes is to intercut the retreating Ford brother with Frank in steady and implacable pursuit. This seems to imply some sort of causal relation. We can see that this is logically impossible, but it is also clearly what gives the scenes their significance as revenge. It is as if the events in them were compelled by a supernatural force, related in some way to Frank's intense commitment to

his purpose. In this context, his calm manner and consistent appearance, the conventional indicators of his integrity as a Western hero, seem almost monstrous, inflecting our understanding of him with a melancholy unease.

These characteristics are initially established as attractive and compelling. Early in the movie, the travelling preacher, from whom Frank hears the encouraging first news of the Fords' trial, asks him, "Are you ready to meet your maker?" Frank replies, "I reckon so." He delivers this defiant response in a slow, relaxed manner that contrasts with the preacher's hellfire rhetoric. We see him in a medium-shot that emphasises his self-possession and physical assurance. He leans forward on the saw he has been using and gives the preacher a look of amused scepticism, his eyes narrowed, smiling slightly while still chewing tobacco [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 1.13]. This, more than anything, is used to stress Frank's essential consistency throughout the movie. We see him chewing tobacco and spitting in court, and in a box at the theatre. Its incongruity in these contexts demonstrates his rough, rural authenticity in contrast to his formal, artificial surroundings. It is also used to indicate his fearlessness and resolve. During the chase sequence leading up to Charlie's death, we see a series of shots of Frank on horseback, chewing tobacco and staring straight ahead. When Charlie turns around and shoots at him, Frank's only response is to spit. When he confronts Charlie, however, his impassivity and singularity of purpose start to seem inhuman. The stern quality to Fonda's appearance becomes a kind of blank severity – he seems both totally focused on the hunt but also strangely absent, like the unthinking agent of a malevolent fate.

This is not just a quirk of performance – the film gives us a context in which to understand Frank as monstrous. The public reputation of the James brothers has been sufficiently inflated in the movie that they are repeatedly discussed as if they were a supernatural phenomenon. After the Fords are pardoned, Major Cobb intentionally frightens them by playing on the ambiguity over whether or not Frank is dead, and suggesting that “The boys always had a mighty peculiar way of turning up just when you least expected ‘em. Mighty peculiar.” After hearing that Frank had an accomplice for the robbery, McCoy (Donald Meek), the head of the St. Louis Midland Railway, announces that he plans to visit Jesse’s grave to make sure that he is dead.

As well as these seemingly incidental allusions to ghosts and coming back from the dead, there are also a number of stylistic elements that suggest a horrific or monstrous dimension. These are most pronounced in the theatre scene, in which Frank confronts the Fords, who are playing themselves on the stage, as the heroes of a dramatic travesty of Jesse’s murder. Having managed to get a fictional account of his own death in Mexico published in the newspaper, Frank is believed to be dead. His stated intention in going to the theatre is to make himself known to the Fords and “scare ‘em to death”. In this case, Frank self-consciously exploits the perception of him as monstrous or ghostly. As he watches the play from a box, Frank is shown in a low-angled medium close-up and lit from the stage below. The resulting shadows make his features look hard and angular. His facial expression does not deviate much from his usual grim sobriety, but seems intensified, as if he

were struggling to contain a seething rage (it is also important that he remains silent throughout the sequence). After the Fords have come onstage and rescued the gingham-clad actress (Barbara Pepper) from the fake James brothers (William Pawley and Bob Battier), Frank stands up. We see him in medium shot from very low angle that makes him loom over the stage [see *Illustrations, Fig. 1.14*]. The final monstrous touch in the scene occurs when Bob Ford throws a lamp up into Frank's box, starting a fire. The flames behind him when he leaps onto the stage make him look particularly demonic.

There is also a hint of this in the final confrontation with Bob at the end of the movie. The livery barn in which Frank corners Bob is dark, cluttered and enclosed. It is a sinister, undefined space, with irregular patterns of shadow. This gives the action a private, furtive quality in contrast to the element of public display which usually characterises Western gunfights. The music in the scene, with its slow tempo, discordant melodic figures and juxtaposition of high and low instruments, sounds more suited to walking around a Gothic castle with a candelabrum than walking around a barn with a six-gun. In its suggestion of the horror genre, the film acknowledges the precariousness of its justification of violence, the regrettable ease with which righteousness can become monstrosity.

A number of other Westerns give their hero a monstrous dimension, often more explicitly linked to his prowess with violence than in *Frank James*. In *Bend of the River*, when Emerson Cole betrays Glyn McLyntock, takes over the wagon train and leaves him behind, Glyn becomes like a vengeful spirit.

He pursues the wagon, picking off one man at a time, his presence only signalled by offscreen gunshots (the same technique used to represent his killing of the Shoshone raiders early in the movie). The realisation that Cole and his men are being followed takes place in a suitably spooky location, around the campfire at night, when they notice that Red (Jack Lambert) is missing. Glyn rejoins the wagon train the next day, after Cole has ridden off to get help. He appears behind the men who had been firing up at the ridge where they thought he was. The men respond by dropping their guns and running away, cowed by his apparently supernatural abilities.

Clint Tollinger (Robert Mitchum) in *Man With The Gun*, also seems to be able to materialise out of nowhere at exactly the right time. He demonstrates this when four gunmen working for the film's main villain, corrupt cattle baron Dade Holman (Joe Barry), come looking for him and he surprises them by appearing in a hatch on the upper level of a stable. But Tollinger's monstrosity comes more from the totality with which he embraces the violence that comes with his job as professional "town-tamer". His excessive commitment to violence is implied through the exaggeration of several of the distinctive visual and behavioural traits associated with Western heroes. As well as wearing a gun on his hip in the conventional manner, he also keeps one tucked into the front of his trousers. It is as if the standard public acknowledgement of violence implied by the gun the holster is not a forceful enough declaration for him. Like Frank James, he also takes the consistency associated with the image of the Westerner to an intensified degree. He dresses exclusively in grey – as Doc Hughes (Florenz Ames) remarks, "Black



would fit his profession better” – and keeps habits of mechanical regularity, stopping for a single drink at exactly five o’clock each day. Tollinger is a man entirely given over to violence. The marshal (Henry Hull) of Sheridan City, the town that hires Tollinger, compares him to “a hungry lion I once seen pacing a cage in St. Louis”, likening his pursuit of violence to a physical need. When he learns from his estranged wife Nelly Bain (Jan Sterling) that their daughter is dead, he loses control and burns down the saloon. The difference in his behaviour when he is in control and when he is out of control, however, is only one of degree. His impulsive actions are only an amplification of the violence we have already seen him display, and he quickly integrates them into his plan for cleaning up the town.

In *The Return of Frank James*, *Bend of the River* and *Man With The Gun*, a familiar aspect of the genre – the exceptional nature of the Western hero – is inflected in a sinister way. The determination and skill of these characters, which are essential attributes if their violence is to be understood as meaningful and redemptive, become inhuman qualities. At the same time, it is important that they are not outright villains. Their violence is still broadly endorsed by the movies – care is taken to demonstrate its justification. Even in *Man With The Gun*, where Tollinger’s violence is presented with distinct ambivalence, Sheridan City is still shown to need him. In the opening scene of the movie Ed Pinchot (Leo Gordon), Holman’s ramrod and top gunman, rides into town and shoots a young boy’s dog for barking at him, smiling slightly as he does so. This little vignette of wanton cruelty establishes that the situation in the town is already bad enough to merit violent action.

The three movies (along with many other Westerns) offer us violence as a narrative necessity, but they also portray it as something dark and alien. We can see that it is good that the hero is able inspire fear in the bad guys, but we can also see why they are afraid. This recognition of a negative dimension even to justified violence brings a melancholy into the experience of these films. This is what Warshow is referring to when he writes about the “tragedy”<sup>74</sup> of Western movies. He argues that the essential aim of the Western hero is “to assert his personal value”<sup>75</sup>, which in the context of violence involves demonstrating the particular rightness of his violent action, in its justification, timing and execution. Because of the complex and troubling nature of violence and its consequences, however, “even this circumscribed demand cannot be fully realised.”<sup>76</sup> Warshow describes the ambiguous effect that this creates:

Since the Westerner is not a murderer but (most of the time) a man of virtue, and since he is always prepared for defeat, he retains his inner invulnerability and his story need not end with his death (and usually does not); but what we finally respond to is not his victory but his defeat.<sup>77</sup>

We recognise both the integrity of the hero and the ways in which it is compromised. Not all Westerns foreground this disjunction to the same degree as, say, *Man With The Gun* does, but it is an available trope of the genre to filmmakers in this period.

### Control and Honour

This is not to say, of course, that the representation of violence in Westerns is characterised by an inevitable futility. The pursuit of meaningful violence, and the examination of the conditions that might make violence meaningful, is an important part of the genre. The point is that this is can be very difficult to achieve. This is one reason why many Westerns attach so much value to the notion of control. They show, as in *Destry* and *Frank James*, the effort the hero puts into avoiding unnecessary violence, and juxtapose it with the wild excesses of the villainous characters and dangerous environments that the hero faces. I have already mentioned that *Destry's* town of Bottleneck is a place where people express excitement by repeatedly shooting their guns in the air, and the same is true of *Dodge City*. This contrasting quality of control is what sets the hero's violence apart, what portrays it as a distinctive and superior approach. Lin McAdam helps the cavalry unit fight off the Indians in *Winchester '73* by suggesting that they initially restrict their fire in order to save ammunition for the second wave of the attack. The patience and discipline of this strategy compensates for the superior numbers and weaponry of the Sioux.

The importance of control in relation to violence is one thing that Warshow and Tompkins' accounts of the Western genre agree on. Warshow argues that the control itself is a key component of our experience of Western movies, whereas Tompkins emphasises its eventual relinquishment, the "flip-flop", in which "Virtue, which up till then had shown itself in long-suffering and

restraint, is suddenly transformed and now consists of all-out aggression.”<sup>78</sup> Both, however (as that quotation suggests), acknowledge the importance of the relationship between violence and control, and the way in which each side of the issue lends significance to the other. The volatile power of violence makes its control into a meaningful struggle, and the persistent necessity of control makes the violence more focused and coherent. As Warshow summarises, “the drama is one of self-restraint: the moment of violence must come in its own time and according to its special laws, or else it is valueless.”<sup>79</sup>

Because of this tension between the conflicting imperatives of expressing and restricting violence, a complex system of value has developed within the genre for distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable forms of violence and related behaviour. There are a wide variety of generic conventions through which we can assess the violence we are presented with. The various ways – moral, social, functional and aesthetic – in which the violence in Westerns can be understood as positive or meaningful can be grouped together in relation to the idea of honour. Honour, as I am using it here, refers less to virtue itself than to its assertion or display. Warshow also describes it in this way, as “a style, concerned with harmonious appearances as much as with desirable consequences”<sup>80</sup>. To argue for the relevance of this value to Westerns is perhaps doing little more than asserting that the significance of film violence depends on its representation. Although this may seem like a statement of the glaringly obvious, it is also a useful reminder, since it draws our attention back to the conditions that inform this

representation. Each act of violence that we see in a Western is offered to us in its own specific context – with a particular visual style, in a particular place in the narrative, in particular relation to the conventions of the genre. In film, and certainly in Hollywood film, these external qualities are the basis of coherent meaning. With this in mind, it is worth taking a moment to consider some of the implications of honour, and their relevance to Westerns.

From a historical perspective, honour is a social value. Its “three basic components”, according to Bertram Wyatt-Brown, are “the inner conviction of self-worth”, “the claim of that self-assessment before the public” and “the assessment of the claim by the public”<sup>81</sup>. In Westerns, these claims are directed at the audience. We are the arbiters of honour in the Westerns that we watch, and our assessments are largely based not on the standards of the society the films depict (which are often shown to be flawed), or those of our own society, but on the standards established by the genre itself. We may (indeed, I very much hope we should) be able to understand why it is wrong to shoot someone in the back, but our sense of it as a quintessentially dishonourable act in Westerns comes from our experience of it in the movies. The accumulated significance of iconography shapes our perception of what “looks right” – that is, what corresponds to the established standards of authenticity and integrity – and what does not. The various attempts to list the ethical principles of the Western hero, such as Gene Autry’s didactic “Cowboy Code”<sup>82</sup> or “The Code of the West” that Robert Nott extrapolates from the films of Randolph Scott, Joel McCrea and Audie Murphy<sup>83</sup> do not so much expose the conventions of the genre as follow them. They are themselves

displays of honour – the rules are less important than the overtness with which they are presented. Honour relies more on the clear acknowledgement that there *are* rules.

Another relevant aspect of honour is the worldview that it implies. Wyatt-Brown suggests that “pessimism” is a “central feature”<sup>84</sup> of the more traditional or “primal”<sup>85</sup> variety of honour. His work is concerned with the place of honour in the culture and society of the American South. He argues that the harshness of the conditions in that region for much of its history were a factor in the endurance of ancient codes of conduct:

Behind this selective, honour-bound fatalism lay centuries of experience with disasters. Recurrent scourges of war, disease, flood, drought, and other natural calamities made impossible a firm sense that progress, whether secular or divine in origin, was a reasonable conjecture. A sense of resignation pervaded Southern colonial and antebellum popular thought.<sup>86</sup>

An ethic that insists on external coherence and collectively maintained standards of behaviour can function as a way of imposing order on a dangerous and turbulent world: “The concept of honour was designed to give structure to life and meaning to valour, hierarchy, and family protection.”<sup>87</sup> We can see how this relates to both melancholy and Westerns. It is melancholy in its acceptance of menace and tribulation as normal or natural states which need to be accommodated rather than overcome. The continuity that the melancholy sensibility often seeks, for example in objects, can also be found in the structures and rituals of honour, which have some of the same fixed external qualities. The portrayal of the world as essentially violent that I have

already noted in a number of Westerns is well suited to this sort of perspective.

Much of what we understand about the world offered to us by Westerns is in fact informed by the context of the Old South. One of the most influential points in the development of the Western hero is *The Virginian*. Wister's novel, which Slotkin calls "the paradigm text of the Western film genre"<sup>88</sup>, is set in the West but has a chivalrous Southerner for a hero. In this context, we might consider the influence of the Southern tradition of the duel on the Western convention of the gunfight<sup>89</sup>. Many of the early novels and stories that imitated James Fenimore Cooper also incorporated Southern themes and characters into frontier narratives<sup>90</sup>. The cultural traffic between the South and the West has run both ways, with Western elements being incorporated into the image of the South, further blurring some of the distinctions between the regions. Both Stanfield and Peterson suggest that Country music has been a very important point of convergence in the representation of Southern and Western identities. In the 1930s, the appeal of Country music was enhanced by the widespread adoption of Western clothing and personae – as Peterson puts it, "by dressing the singer of heartfelt hillbilly songs in the heroic cowboy outfit."<sup>91</sup> A Western style enabled Country performers to play down the negative stereotypes associated with the South (those of the hillbilly or the redneck) whilst retaining a folksy appeal:

As a national figure, the cowboy evaded the pejorative connotations attached to the figure of the South cut adrift from the rest of the nation while still appearing to represent an image of regionalism that escaped accusations of atavistic parochialism.<sup>92</sup>

This in turn, Stanfield argues, had an influence on Western movies. The success of Country and Western music, and of musical B-Westerns in the 1930s demonstrated a substantial “potential market” for all things Western and “meant that the studios were taking little or no risk with the move back to A-feature Western production”<sup>93</sup> at the end of the decade. Although the proven commercial formulas were altered and adapted in the Westerns that followed, Stanfield still notes the persistence of Southern elements in the genre, particularly in its music: “Most of the musical pieces, both diegetic and extradiegetic, owe an overwhelming debt to the songs of Stephen Foster: ‘Oh! Susanna’ rings out time and again.”<sup>94</sup>

It is striking how often the heroes of Westerns are given an overt connection to the South. One of the most common ways this is expressed is by making the character a Confederate veteran of the Civil War. Examples from the films I have been looking at include Wade Hatton in *Dodge City*, Frank James in *The Return of Frank James* and Lin McAdam in *Winchester '73*. This aspect of the heroes' background is used to help establish a sense of them as chivalrous and honourable (in keeping with the often nostalgic portrayal of the South in Hollywood movies), as well as giving them an archaic, even anachronistic dimension. This can also suggest a melancholy element to their clearly defined image and single-minded pursuit of violence, linked to the idea that the values they uphold are those of a defeated culture, already consigned to the past. A number of Western heroes are shown to retain a futile devotion to the famous “Lost Cause”, to the extent of failing to recognise the South's surrender. The most famous of these is Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) in *The*



*Searchers* (John Ford, Warner Brothers / C.V. Whitney, USA 1956), who still retains his Confederate sabre, but another prominent example is O'Meara (Rod Steiger) in *Run of the Arrow* (Samuel Fuller, Globe Enterprises, USA, 1957). Similar elements play an important, but more oblique role in the backstory of Martin Brady (Robert Mitchum) in *The Wonderful Country* (Robert Parrish, D.R.M. Productions, USA, 1959). Brady's father is revealed to have fought with Joe Shelby's Missourians, the famous Confederate cavalry unit who rode to Mexico in defiance of the surrender. This echoes Brady's own story in the movie, as he flees the consequences of his violent actions in America by going to Mexico and working as a hired gun.

Giving Western heroes a Southern background frames their distinctiveness in a particular context. It suggests, however sketchily, a social origin to their individualistic behaviour. This is also an important part of the ethic of honour. It both elevates and regulates, conferring distinction on those of strong public reputation whilst also insisting on the equality of all who are honourable<sup>95</sup>. Here, once again, we can see a characteristically melancholy tension – that between the individual and the typical, the unique and the conventional. I would like to conclude this chapter by considering violence in Westerns in these terms.

### The Fair Fight

Westerns repeatedly assert the importance of the fair fight. This is often the most important criterion for distinguishing legitimate violence. It is most

clearly embodied in the convention of the face-to-face gunfight, but it can be seen across different forms of violence in the genre. Obviously, the values of honour are important in this context – in the visible display of fairness and the importance of clear and recognisable conventions. The public nature of gunfights, and their role in the making of reputations, is one of the reasons that Tom Destry gives for avoiding them. He considers participating in an activity that can bestow honour on criminals to be counter-productive to the establishment of law and order: “You shoot it out with ‘em and for some reason or other – I don’t know why – they get to look like heroes.”

As well as honour, however, there is another, more modern American ethic at work in the conventions of the gunfight – the ethic of success. In *The Gunfighter*, when Jimmy Ringo meets his eight-year-old son (B. G. Norman), the boy asks the famous gunman why he did not draw on him when he burst into the room. Keen to instruct his son in proper conduct, Jimmy replies “Draw on an unarmed man? I never did that in my life. You’ve got to give everybody a fair chance, don’t you?” Ringo is doing more than teaching his son manners here. Despite his disillusionment with his violent life, he is also defending the basis of his own reputation. His success as a gunfighter is only meaningful because his opponents also had a “fair chance”. The American ideal of success depends on the assumption (however erroneous, in social and economic terms) of equal opportunity – without it, success cannot be felt to be deserved. For the result of the gunfight to mean anything, it has to begin with the participants on the same supposed level.

This convention is used in a number of Westerns to generate moments of uncertainty and suspense. A recurring device is to show the gunfighters shooting at each other, but to cut away from the action so as to delay revealing who has been hit, playing on the possibility that it could be either character. This happens in the face-off at the end of *Colt .45*. When Farrell confronts Brett in the sheriff's office, he finds him unarmed, the bullets in his revolvers having all been used up. Farrell puts down his own guns and fights Brett hand-to-hand, establishing an equal footing for the confrontation. Brett frees himself from Farrell's grip and dashes over to the desk, where both his empty pistols and Farrell's loaded ones have been left. We see both men grab a pair of guns, with no clear indication of which are loaded and which are not. This brings an element of impersonal chance into the gunfight, further emphasising the possibility that either man could win. The fight ends with an oddly static two-shot, the two characters facing each other from either side of the frame [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 1.15]. We hear a gunshot and see a puff of smoke rise up between them, but the decisive action takes place offscreen. Their guns are held below the bottom edge of the frame, so it is impossible to be sure which of them has managed to get a shot off. This ambiguity is extended by cutting outside to the people on the street reacting to the gunshot and waiting to see what has happened. A drum roll on the soundtrack announces this moment as one of tense anticipation. From broadly the crowd's point of view, we see a figure appear in the dark doorway of the sheriff's office. It is initially unclear which of the two men it is, but then it is revealed to be Brett when he steps out into the light. He is upright, and not visibly injured, but he staggers forward and collapses. Farrell then comes out

too, and we see that he is unharmed. By having Brett emerge first, however, the movie makes us consider the possibility that he might have won the fight. A similar approach is employed at the end of *Stagecoach* (which I will return to in the next chapter), after the confrontation between The Ringo Kid (John Wayne) and the Plummer brothers. As Buscombe summarises: “Only when Luke Plummer walks with an unnaturally steady gait into the saloon and falls dead on the floor do we know the outcome.”<sup>96</sup> Again, for a brief moment we are confronted with the possibility that the villain might have emerged victorious.

This sort of temporary ambiguity or deception can also be found in other scenes of violent confrontation. We do not see the latter part of the fistfight between Cole Harden and Wade Harper (Forrest Tucker) in *The Westerner*. We see the two men punch each other and roll around in the dust, but the scene ends with a shot of the shadows they cast on the ground as they continue to fight. The scene then dissolves into a shot of Jane Ellen Matthews (Doris Davenport) nursing someone’s injuries in her cabin. We cannot see who she is ministering to – he is obscured by the back of the sofa he is lying on. The camera tracks in and the man on the sofa sits up, revealing himself as Harper. The movie then cuts outside to a long shot of Harden on horseback. Closer shots will reveal cuts and bruises from the fight, but at this distance he maintains the pristine outline of the Western hero and it is clear from the contrast between the two men that he won the fight.

What all of these conflicts have in common is a moment of interchangeable identity, where the distinctions between the combatants are temporarily ambiguous. This is most explicit in *The Westerner's* shadow play. Under other circumstances, we might understand it as a means of lessening the impact of depicted violence, perhaps to avoid censorship (in Stephen Prince's classification of such techniques, it fits into the category of "indexical pointing"<sup>97</sup>). In this case, however, the fight is a minor incident and contains nothing particularly brutal or shocking that would need to be softened. Instead, the shadows become an image of anonymity, of the loss of individual identity in the equalising ritual of the fair fight. Slotkin notes a similar "interchange of identities"<sup>98</sup> in nineteenth-century literary mythology of the frontier, where hunting was often portrayed in terms of a certain spiritual exchange between hunter and prey. Warshow argues that the gunfight represents the ultimate moment of self-assertion for the Western hero:

The Westerner could not fulfil himself if the moment did not finally come when he can shoot his enemy down. But because that moment is so thoroughly the expression of his being, it must be kept pure.<sup>99</sup>

As we have seen, however, the conditions for keeping such encounters "pure" can also entail the loss, or at least the temporary suspension, of the identity they are supposed to express. I have already argued that Western heroes can be made to seem inhuman in their pursuit of violence, and this is a related point. The attempt to assert individual value through highly conventionalised violence can have the opposite effect – it can end up stressing the typical and the generic qualities of the action instead. The titles of many of the movies I have looked at suggest this contradiction. *The Westerner*, *The Gunfighter*,

*Man With The Gun* – these imply both an exemplary individual and an anonymous type. The tension between the two has well-established connotations of melancholy, as outlined in the previous section of this thesis. This is self-consciously expressed in *The Gunfighter*. Jimmy Ringo's weary melancholy comes in part from his sense of the tawdry predictability of the situations he faces – it seems as if he encounters the same challenges, the same grudges and the same awkward celebrity wherever he goes.

But the melancholy of *The Gunfighter* draws on both sides of the contradiction. Ringo's unhappy situation is as much a product of his distinctiveness as his typicality. Although he strictly adheres to the conventions of the fair fight, to the extent that they threaten to overwhelm him, his obviously superior skill with a gun undermines any sense of equality. This near certainty of success in a face-off denies him (and us) the satisfaction of a victory that has in any demonstrable sense been earned.

The same frustrations can be felt in *Man With The Gun*, where the fair fights that Clint Tollinger contrives between himself and several of the film's villains seem artificial and cruel because of Tollinger's obvious mastery of violence. In the scene I referred to earlier when he surprises four men who have come after him, he gets three of them to remove their gunbelts, but allows the fourth, Slim (actor uncredited), to keep his on. He puts down his shotgun and stands with his hands on his hips, clearly waiting for the nervous-looking Slim to draw on him. Slim draws, but Tollinger is much faster and kills him. Later, when Tollinger burns down the Palace Saloon, he returns the Bowie knife he

had earlier confiscated from the proprietor, Frenchy Lescaux (Ted de Corsia), and turns his back to leave. When Lescaux throws the knife at him, he ducks, spins around and shoots him. The emphasis in both of these scenes is on Tollinger's deliberate manipulation of his opponent (or, we might say, victim) into giving him the opportunity to kill them in a superficially fair fight. First he makes sure they are armed, then he consciously gives them an opening. But our sense of his prowess and stature relative to the man he faces makes the outcome of each fight seem inevitable. Tollinger's opponents are minor villains, facing the film's hero and star. They seem afraid, whereas he seems determined. Mitchum even appears physically larger than most of the other actors in the movie. But the power that Tollinger knowingly wields makes a mockery of the conventions of the fair fight. The melancholy here is in the diminished value of these conventions, the sense that their power to provide significance and satisfaction has been compromised.

Westerns need both individual self-assertion and familiar conventions to make their violence meaningful. But, as I have argued, too much of either can create a melancholy imbalance. In extreme cases, the results can be less melancholy than outright depressed – *The Ox-Bow Incident* (William Wellman, Twentieth Century-Fox, USA, 1943) minimises the significance of decisive individual action by focusing on the collective guilt of a lynch mob. As Warshow comments, "It is significant that *The Ox-Bow Incident* has no hero; a hero would have to stop the lynching or be killed in trying to stop it"<sup>100</sup>. As a consequence, the movie ends with a sense of futility and despair, with the characters seemingly drained of all energy and purpose. But it is rare to see

a Western from this period go so far to one extreme or another. Generally, some sort of compromise is arrived at.

A common version of this is to end by establishing limits to the hero's distinctive individuality, making him in some way less exceptional, more ordinary. The final stage in Wright's conception of the "Classical" Western plot structure is "The hero loses or gives up his special status"<sup>101</sup>, which Wright illustrates with examples from *Shane*, *Dodge City*, and a number of other movies<sup>102</sup>. This adjustment allows the hero to have been an agent of meaningful violence without letting this violence come to define him too completely. At the end of *Man With The Gun*, Tollinger is made into a less threatening figure when he is shot by Dade Holman. He seems to have been wounded rather than killed, but the important point is that he loses his air of tyrannical invincibility. He is reconciled with his wife, who cradles him on the ground [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 1.16]. In this respect, the ending resembles that of another movie from the same year, from a very different genre: *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, Universal, USA, 1955). In both endings, the differences that have kept an estranged couple apart are effaced when the man becomes an invalid and the woman assumes a more maternal attitude towards him. Jim Kitses describes the heroes of Anthony Mann's Westerns as "*brought low*"<sup>103</sup> by the physical and psychological cost of their violent self-assertion. Like them, Tollinger comes back from the brink of irrevocable excess. He is weakened, but he is also redeemed.



The ending of *The Gunfighter* involves a more complex accommodation of the tensions between distinction and typicality. In one respect, the issue of Jimmy Ringo's problematic distinction is resolved. He is able to pass on the burden of his reputation to Hunt Bromley (Skip Homeier), the young man who kills him. In death, Ringo achieves both the status of public legend (as demonstrated by the crowds at his funeral) and a kind of anonymity. His reputation is detached from the violent realities of his actual life and becomes a mythic abstraction. At the end of the movie, we hear the hymn, 'Rock of Ages', first sung by the mourners at Ringo's funeral, then in a non-diegetic orchestral version. The song deals with the comfort of submitting to a higher power, of burying oneself in the bosom of the eternal. This is precisely what the legend of Ringo now offers – a permanence that transcends loss. The final shot of the movie shows a silhouetted figure, presumably Ringo, riding away [see *Illustrations*, *Fig. 1.17*]. The silhouette gives the figure a supernatural appearance whilst also emphasising the generic quality to its outline – it is a distillation of the image of the Western hero. Stripped of the complications of violence, Ringo's image takes on the reassuring clarity of an object or symbol, invested with melancholy appeal.

I have attempted to cover quite a wide range of topics in this chapter, in order to demonstrate the complexities and contradictions involved in the portrayal of violence in Westerns. As a result, I have arrived at melancholy from a variety of directions, some more straightforward than others. Some of the representations of violence I have discussed provide little more than a glimpse of melancholy, whilst others develop their melancholy implications

more fully. In the next two chapters I want to extend my discussion of some of the issues raised in this chapter in relation to two much more specific melancholy tropes. In my discussion of old men in Chapter 3, I will return to the themes of individual pre-eminence and success. First, however, I will examine the conventions of honour and the control of violence in a different context – the Western town at night.

---

<sup>1</sup> Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> See my Review of Literature, pp. 16-18.

<sup>4</sup> Fairlamb, "'One in a Thousand': Western Stars, Heroes and their Guns', p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Two examples from the American military are the crossed pistol insignia of the Military Police and the crossed muskets, which denote the Infantry.

<sup>6</sup> Fairlamb, "'One in a Thousand': Western Stars, Heroes and their Guns', p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 381.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 381.

<sup>11</sup> See, Robert Nott, *Last of the Cowboy Heroes: The Westerns of Randolph Scott, Joel McCrea and Audie Murphy* (London: McFarland and Company, 2000), p. 67.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> John Fraser, *Violence in the Arts* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>16</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Fairlamb, "'One in a Thousand': Western Stars, Heroes and their Guns', p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> See my Introduction to Melancholy, pp. 69-70.

<sup>20</sup> Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 112,

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>25</sup> Tompkins, *West of Everything*, p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> See Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 180-182.

<sup>27</sup> Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 107.

<sup>28</sup> Kiteses, *Horizons West*, p. 71.

- 
- <sup>29</sup> Tompkins, *West of Everything*, p. 8.
- <sup>30</sup> Douglas Pye, 'The Collapse of Fantasy: Masculinity in the Westerns of Anthony Mann', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western*, p. 172.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 172.
- <sup>32</sup> Fairlamb, '"One in a Thousand": Western Stars, Heroes and their Guns', p. 22.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 22.
- <sup>34</sup> See, for example, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1988) pp. 16-18.
- <sup>35</sup> David Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film, Fourth Edition* (London, Little, Brown, 2003), p. 943.
- <sup>36</sup> Kim Newman, *Wild West Movies, or How The West Was Found, Won, Lost, Lied About, Filmed and Forgotten* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990), pp. 64-65.
- <sup>37</sup> Kitses, *Horizons West*, p. 59.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 33.
- <sup>39</sup> See ibid., p.30, p. 49, p. 57, p. 75 and p. 77 and Wood, 'Man(n) of the West(ern)', p. 31.
- <sup>40</sup> Kitses, *Horizons West*, pp. 31-33.
- <sup>41</sup> Tompkins, *West of Everything*, p. 228.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 229.
- <sup>43</sup> Fraser, *Violence in the Arts*, p. 142.
- <sup>44</sup> Tompkins, *West of Everything*, pp. 232-233.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 227.
- <sup>46</sup> Fraser, *Violence in the Arts*, p. 72.
- <sup>47</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 291.
- <sup>48</sup> See Martin Pumphrey's reminiscences of dressing up as a cowboy when he was a child, in 'Why Do Cowboys Wear Hats in the Bath? Style Politics for the Older Man', p. 51.
- <sup>49</sup> See Edward Buscombe, *Stagecoach* (London: British Film Institute, 1992), pp. 83-84, Stanfield, 'Country music and the 1939 Western: from Hillbillies to Cowboys', pp. 30-32 and Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 286-292.
- <sup>50</sup> Tom Vallance, 'Obituary: Bobs Watson', *The Independent*, 7<sup>th</sup> July 1999, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-bobs-watson-1104741.html>, accessed July 2010.
- <sup>51</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 288.
- <sup>52</sup> Charles Barr, 'Dodge City', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western*, p. 184.
- <sup>53</sup> Stanfield, 'Country music and the 1939 Western: from Hillbillies to Cowboys', p. 32.
- <sup>54</sup> See Stanley Cavell, 'Being Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe)', in Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Scepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 128.
- <sup>55</sup> Stanfield, 'Country music and the 1939 Western: from Hillbillies to Cowboys', p. 29.

- 
- <sup>56</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 289.
- <sup>57</sup> Barr, 'Dodge City', p. 186.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 182.
- <sup>59</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 290.
- <sup>60</sup> Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 237n.
- <sup>61</sup> Florence Jacobowitz, 'The Dietrich Westerns: *Destry Rides Again* and *Rancho Notorious*', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western*, p. 92.
- <sup>62</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, genre and the action cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 169n.
- <sup>63</sup> Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 123.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 116.
- <sup>65</sup> Tompkins, *West of Everything*, p. 229.
- <sup>66</sup> See Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 301-302.
- <sup>67</sup> Jacobowitz, 'The Dietrich Westerns: *Destry Rides Again* and *Rancho Notorious*', pp. 92-93.
- <sup>68</sup> See Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 108.
- <sup>69</sup> Robin Wood, *Rancho Notorious: A Noir Western in Colour*, *CineAction!* 12 / 13 (August 1988), p. 93.
- <sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 91.
- <sup>71</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 298.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 295.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 302.
- <sup>74</sup> Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 113.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 113.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 113.
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 113.
- <sup>78</sup> Tompkins, *West of Everything*, p. 229.
- <sup>79</sup> Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 123.
- <sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 111.
- <sup>81</sup> Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honour*, p. 14.
- <sup>82</sup> See Stanfield, *Horse Opera: The Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy* (Urbana / Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 2.
- <sup>83</sup> See Nott, *Last of the Cowboy Heroes*, p. 57.
- <sup>84</sup> Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honour*, p. 27.
- <sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 34.
- <sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 29.
- <sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 60.
- <sup>88</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 169.
- <sup>89</sup> See Buscombe, *Stagecoach*, p. 75 and Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honour*, p. 351.
- <sup>90</sup> See Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, pp. 507-516.
- <sup>91</sup> Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, p. 82.

---

<sup>92</sup> Stanfield, *Horse Opera*, p. 72.

<sup>93</sup> Stanfield, 'Country music and the 1939 Western: from Hillbillies to Cowboys', p. 26.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>95</sup> See Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honour*, p. 46.

<sup>96</sup> Buscombe, *Stagecoach*, p. 75.

<sup>97</sup> Stephen Prince, *Classical Film Violence: Designing and Regulating Brutality in Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1968* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), p. 230.

<sup>98</sup> Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, p. 479.

<sup>99</sup> Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 110.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>101</sup> Wright, *Six Guns and Society*, p. 48.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>103</sup> Kitses, *Horizons West*, p. 35.

Chapter 2: Western Towns at Night (or, It's not a duel, and it doesn't take  
place in the sun)

The night-time town – or, more specifically, the night-time street – is a commonly recurring setting for scenes in Westerns. What Michael Walker refers to as “The traditional one-street Western town”<sup>1</sup> has its own set of familiar nocturnal images – dark buildings, bright doorways, resting horses and traffic in and out of saloons. The significance of the night-time town as a melancholy trope comes from its use as a location where rules are broken and expectations are confounded. In the previous chapter, I discussed some of the strategies and conventions through which Westerns represent violence as meaningful, and the ways in which these representations are sometimes complicated and made problematic. In Western towns at night, such complications can be especially obvious and concentrated, resulting in a portrayal of violence that offers us little reassurance. In particular, the night-time town seems to be a place where more dishonourable forms of violence, including back-shooting, are possible, or even appropriate.

The idea of the night-time town as a self-contained alternative world within a genre movie was suggested by Robin Wood. Describing the central generic tension shared by *Shadow of a Doubt* (Alfred Hitchcock, Universal, USA, 1943) and *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, Liberty Films, USA, 1946) as “the disturbing influx of *film noir* into the world of small-town domestic comedy”, Wood remarks that the same thing is evident in *My Darling Clementine* (John Ford, Twentieth Century-Fox, USA, 1946) in “the opposition

between the daytime and night-time Tombstones”<sup>2</sup>. In these examples, Wood suggests, the conventions of *film noir*, the emblematic genre of the night-time city, are evoked in the presentation of smaller towns at night, including, in the case of *Clementine*, a Western town. These towns become microcosms of what Walker calls “the *noir* world”<sup>3</sup>. This world, as Walker defines it, is “an underworld of crime, vice and murder” which is nonetheless connected to “the world of bourgeois order and propriety.”<sup>4</sup> As such, “It is a world of duplicity and dissimulation”<sup>5</sup>, founded on the deceit and corruption within mainstream society. I do not propose to relate all of my observations about Western towns at night to the context of *noir*, but I do want to explore how a similar relationship between parallel worlds might work in a Western context. What interests me is the possibility of there being, within Westerns, an alternative melancholy space in which different values and assumptions obtain, where the conventions of the daytime world are corrupted, or reflected more pessimistically.

In order to examine this space, I will spend most of this chapter looking in detail at three scenes in which a character is killed in a Western town at night. The sequences that I will be analysing come from three quite disparate Westerns from distinctive directors. Each has its particular tone and cross-generic affiliations. *Pursued* is the closest of the three movies to *noir*, but also has features that link it to domestic melodrama. *Rio Bravo* juxtaposes action with ensemble comedy. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is more sober in tone and engages more overtly with historical themes. Across the three films,

however, the night-time town scenes contain elements that are strikingly similar.

### The Implicit Standard of the Gunfight

In each sequence, then, a character is shot dead on the dark streets of a Western town. In none of them does the unfortunate character have a clear view of the person who shoots him; only in *Pursued* is the victim aware of his killer's presence at all. Through this common quality, the three films engage with, and disrupt, the generic conventions of the gunfight. I have already alluded to these conventions in the previous chapter, but it is useful to provide an explicit summary. Typically, two characters in plain sight of each other (and often in public view) face off, quickness to the draw and accuracy thereafter determining who lives and who dies. David Lusted suggests that:

In Westerns, back-shooting – shooting an adversary from behind – transgresses the ritual of the gunfight, which demands that an opponent is faced. Back-shooters thereby offend not just against the code of justice but against the social codes of a democratic masculinity by rejecting the public display of fair play.<sup>6</sup>

As we have seen, this “public display of fair play” (at least as an ideal) exemplifies a number of the important criteria of value and authenticity that Westerns offer us. Its public, visible dimension addresses the ethic of honour, whilst its conventions of fairness provide a platform for assertive individual action. Back-shooting undermines these values, and by extension, any claim that the back-shooter might make to integrity and status. An example of the association between back-shooting and inauthenticity can be seen in



*Stagecoach*, where Doc Boone (Thomas Mitchell) expresses his disdain for the affected manners of Southern dandy Major Hatfield. Admonished by Hatfield for smoking in front of a lady, something “a gentleman” would never do, Doc responds by saying, “Three weeks ago, I took a bullet out of a man who was shot by a *gentleman*. The bullet was in his back.” Here, the gunfight is the implicit standard of public virtue, against which other pretences to honour are judged to be false.

The public values of the gunfight are expressed on a more official level in *Pursued*, in a scene prior to the nocturnal shooting. At the inquest into the death of rancher Adam Callum (John Rodney) in a long-distance rifle battle with his step-brother, the film’s protagonist Jeb Rand (Robert Mitchum), the local coroner (Ian Wolfe) outlines the social and legal conventions that govern killing a man. Telling his jury that Jeb is “no ambusher”, he goes on to say that:

It don’t stand to reason that a man that shot down a dozen fellers in battle would shoot down his own brother without giving him a chance. If he had to drill him, he’d do it right. And if he done it right, then it ain’t no killing, but a lawful fight. And hereabouts we ain’t so danged uncivilised that a man can’t win a lawful fight without getting his neck in a noose for it.

As well as emphasising that the “right” way to kill a man is enshrined in common law, the coroner enlists Jeb’s war record in his defence. This portrays the conventions of the gunfight as analogous to military rules of engagement. The reference to giving one’s opponent “a chance” also underlines the competitive nature of the Western duel, the necessity of fairness in order to prove merit and skill. Significantly, this part of the film

draws our attention to the terms in which gunfights are judged to be legitimate, explicitly establishing this standard for us to refer to later.

The Shooting in the Night-time Town, version 1: *Pursued*

In their use of hidden gunmen, the night-time shootings in *Pursued* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* subvert the conventions of the gunfight. The equivalent scene in *Rio Bravo* forms part of the film's outright rejection of the one-on-one face-off as simplistic and irrelevant. Of the three, the sequence in *Pursued* is closest to a traditional face-off. In this scene, Jeb Rand is challenged to a duel by young Prentice (Harry Carey Jr.), which takes place in a dark alley alongside the Honest Wheel casino in the town of Lone Horse. It is necessary at this point to provide some narrative context. In the previous scene, at a social gathering, Jeb had danced with his former step-sister and future wife Thorley Callum (Teresa Wright) against her will (she danced with him only to avoid causing a public scene). Prentice, Thorley's escort for the evening, is then coerced by her uncle Grant Callum (Dean Jagger) into avenging this insult to her good name.

As this summary suggests, the context the film establishes for the gunfight is one of manners and social graces. This is a public world, which many of the characters would identify with the standards of honour, but we are encouraged to recognise the concealment and deception involved in this. In his detailed examination of *Pursued*, Andrew Britton emphasises the importance of this dimension to a number of different aspects of the film – not

only is Thorley's bitter "compliance" on the dancefloor motivated by "etiquette", but in the film's later courtship scenes, "Bourgeois good manners become... masks for murder"<sup>7</sup>. Before a single shot is fired, then, the gunfight between Jeb and Prentice has been placed, not in the arena of transparency and self-assertion, but in that of pretence and affectation, the domain of false honour that Doc Boone associates with Major Hatfield in *Stagecoach*. This is accentuated both by Jeb's dandyish costume (waistcoat, cravat and pale-coloured Stetson) and by Prentice's awkwardly formal mode of speech leading up to the fight (he repeatedly calls Jeb "Mr. Rand"). The context that is established for the fight is a melancholy one – it is founded on obvious deceit, and thus cannot affirm anything of value.

The setting of the night-time town is a crucial part of this. A large proportion of the social life of Western towns takes place at night. The sound that characterises Western scenes set on night-time streets is that of music spilling out from a saloon. As well as indicating the proximity of fairly large numbers of people (without actually showing them), this also blurs the distinctions between inside and outside. This ambiguity can be seen in the first scene in *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, Vanguard Films, USA, 1946), where Pearl Chavez (Jennifer Jones) is seen dancing outside a *presidio* (a Spanish-built fort, which in the film has been converted into a huge bar and gambling house) in an unnamed Southwestern town. Inside, the Presidio is so bustling and cavernous as to make it seem like the site of an outdoor fiesta. Subsequently, Pearl hides in the darkened street and watches, in silhouette through the window of a nearby house, her father shoot her mother and the

man she was with. Through Pearl's concealment and the murder's visibility, indoors mimics outdoors, and vice versa. In the shadows of a Western street, it is possible to be both obscured and exposed, hidden from sight but subject to social scrutiny.

It is this presentation of the night-time street as both secret and social that gives the fight between Jeb and Prentice in *Pursued* its sense of pathos. On the secret side, we see Jeb hiding in, and eventually being forced to shoot from, the shadows. On the social side, we see Prentice, determined to do what he considers right and proper. The two characters are shown to have a sense of fair play – before they meet in the alley, both reject suggestions of ways to gain an unfair advantage. Grant Callum suggests that Prentice should shoot at Jeb through the back window of the Honest Wheel. Jake Dingle (Alan Hale) advises Jeb to hurry out into the street in order to “get the drop” on Prentice. Both men refuse, but take opposite courses of action. Prentice remains entrenched in his aim to fight a formal duel, whilst Jeb's plan is to “step out in the alley and make myself scarce.” His decision to slip away under cover of darkness may seem cowardly by the standards of public honour, but it also demonstrates the subtlety and pragmatism that he has developed working with Dingle at the Honest Wheel. It is this attitude that prompts him to attempt to flee, rather than be forced to kill the young and innocent Prentice, who has already admitted that he is “not much good with a gun” (whilst Jeb is a decorated war veteran). The disjunction between Jeb's unwillingness to fight and Prentice's insistence that he do so makes the death of the latter seem all the more like a tragic waste.

As the film's protagonist, Jeb is doubly undermined by the gunfight. He recognises that no good can come from it, whatever the result, and so he tries to avoid it. He is, however, unable to stop himself from getting dragged into the conflict. His control of the situation is shown to be very limited – he is compelled to respond to the circumstances in which he finds himself in a sudden and compromised way. When he has to fight back (only after Prentice has shot and missed several times), it is from a concealed position. It is worth noting at this stage the extent to which the events of the fight are shaped by their setting – how both the topography of the night-time town and its darkness help determine the outcome of the fight. In his attempts to escape, Jeb manages to get around the back of Prentice, hiding behind a carriage in a stable as his opponent continues to advance down the alleyway [see *Illustrations, Fig. 2.1*]. Trying to open a door that will presumably let him out the other side, Jeb makes a sound that alerts Prentice to his whereabouts. Prentice fires into the darkness and misses. Forced to defend himself, Jeb produces a gun from inside his jacket. This itself suggests something more clandestine and disreputable about Jeb's use of violence. He is not candid about his deadliness; he fails to project what Warshow calls the "image of a single man with a gun on his thigh"<sup>8</sup>. But the hidden gun is not a characteristic of Jeb alone. In the previous scene, we have seen Grant Callum hand Prentice a gun which had been concealed in his jacket. Lone Horse by night is a place where guns are kept out of sight, by heroes and villains alike.

Jeb's unfair advantage is further emphasised at the moment he shoots Prentice. We cut to a camera position behind Prentice, framing the young man and the stable in long shot. We hear two shots, and see Prentice fall, but we do not see Jeb. In the next shot, where we do see him, his face is still partially obscured by shadow [see *Illustrations, Fig. 2.2*]. The emphasis on Jeb's concealment persists into the shot after that, in which on one side of the stable wall a group of local men are approaching to investigate the sound of the gunshots, whilst on the other side Jeb is advancing towards the fallen Prentice. Neither Jeb nor the men seem aware of each other. This demonstrates a key aspect of our orientation on the scene. It is important that we are able to see a much fuller picture of what is going on than any of the characters are, and that we are aware of this. We see that Jeb is unseen, and we are in a position to consider the significance of this. On the one hand, we can judge his actions to be dishonourable, for failing in terms of openness and visibility in his use of violence. On the other, we can also see that this is not entirely his fault, that the elements that make the shooting appear wrong to us were not chosen, but imposed upon him. The perspective we are offered on the gunfight and its aftermath is, in this respect, a melancholy one. Our point of view is detached enough (although much of the film is narrated by Jeb in flashback, this functions more as a convenient framing device than an indicator of a sustained subjective perspective) that we are conscious of the complex and troubling implications of what we see. We are granted a sad wisdom that the characters lack.

As I have argued, part of what emerges from this scene is a sense of Jeb's relative passivity. In a genre that so often insists on the exceptional nature of its heroes, the extent to which his advantage comes from his surroundings, rather than himself is significant. We are still aware that he is the more proficient of the two men with a gun, but we also see how little that counts in this context. The movie makes it clear that anyone can shoot or be shot from the shadows. This is emphasised just after the killing of Prentice, when Jeb steps back out into the alley. He is seen sideways on, in a long shot from up in the alley by the back room of the Honest Wheel. Grant Callum enters the frame from the back left, cocks his gun and points it, from the darkness, at Jeb [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 2.3]. It is important that we can see Jeb looking down at Prentice – through this we know that he is unaware of Callum (again, our perspective is privileged). Callum is interrupted by the sound of another pistol being cocked. He looks over his shoulder and the camera pans around to reveal a gun pointed at him, this one belonging to Jake Dingle, who warns Callum off shooting at Jeb [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 2.4]. This staggered succession of hidden guns gives the option of back-shooting a perverse sense of equality. In the night-time town, it is available to all. The diversity of the characters involved – the hero, the villain and a morally ambiguous but basically sympathetic supporting character – demonstrates the capacity for this sort of violence, and the environment that permits it, to overcome such distinctions of identity and status. This is not the impersonal ritual of the fair fight, but rather a proliferation of opportunities for unfairness. In this context, violence becomes meaningless. It can be used on anyone, by anyone. Skill

and purpose are no longer reliable guarantors of survival, let alone assertions of individuality.

The presence of Callum and Dingle also reminds us of the social dimensions to the gunfight, that it was never simply a face-off between two men, but the product of a much larger and more complex situation embodied in the night-time town. The darkness of the town reflects the lack of clarity in this situation – the intricate background of grudges and allegiances, guilt and misunderstanding, cannot be condensed into a single conflict between two gunmen. This indication that the issues that prompted the fight remain present and unresolved adds to the sense of the futility of Prentice's death. The setting of the fight expresses a melancholy awareness of the complexities and problems that frame it.

#### The Shooting in the Night-time Town, version 2: *Rio Bravo*

The nocturnal shooting of Pat Wheeler (Ward Bond) in *Rio Bravo* fulfils a similar function, demonstrating both the impossibility of isolating a particular conflict from its surroundings and the inadequacy of the individual in this context, however skilled he may be. The film's main protagonist, Sheriff John T. Chance (John Wayne), although strong and capable, is candid about his own limitations. When asked why he carries a rifle, he replies that, "I found some were faster than me with a short gun." The shooting of Wheeler is the first major indication that the situation Chance faces is larger and more serious than can be dealt with by his abilities alone.



This is already hinted at in the film's second scene, the first to contain any dialogue, in which only the intervention of Dude (Dean Martin) allows Chance to arrest Joe Burdette (Claude Akins) without being threatened by Burdette's henchmen. But it is Wheeler's death that reveals the scope of the threat to Chance and his comrades, in part by drawing on the melancholy understanding of the night-time town as a site of deception and malevolence.

Wheeler is shot in the back by a gunman hired by Nathan Burdette (John Russell), Joe's wealthy and influential brother. He is killed because of his "well-intentioned indiscretions"<sup>9</sup> – trying to recruit men to assist Chance without paying enough attention to who might be listening. This in itself suggests a parallel with *Pursued*. In *Rio Bravo*, the social dynamic of the night-time town is once again portrayed as lethally oppressive. Just as Prentice's display of decorum gets him killed, Wheeler's display of loyalty does the same. Whilst Grant Callum is able to manipulate Prentice by citing social conventions, Nathan Burdette is able to dictate the conventions of what can and cannot be said in public through the ubiquitous presence of his men. In both movies, the explicitly social character to the menace that the characters face suggests a *noir* quality, a darkness that develops out of the world of everyday relationships and interactions.

As with *Pursued*, the wider implications of the shooting of Wheeler are suggested by the manipulation of point of view<sup>10</sup>. The sequence begins with Chance emerging from the town's hotel bar to meet Dude on the veranda. As the camera moves to frame the men in a two-shot, Chance asks Dude if he

has seen Wheeler. Dude says, “Not since he went up the street. I think that’s him coming now”, and indicates to the left [see *Illustrations, Fig. 2.5*]. We cut to a long shot of Wheeler walking back towards the hotel [see *Illustrations, Fig. 2.6*]. Within this standard shot / reverse shot configuration, there is a slight positional variation that inflects our perspective on the action. Both the two-shot of Dude and Chance and the long shot of Wheeler are more sideways-on than might usually be expected. Both are viewed at a pronounced diagonal. This has the effect of subtly differentiating our perspective from that of the two men looking down the street. It also helps create a more three-dimensional sense of the immediate environment, opening up the space of the street in front of the hotel and to the left of Wheeler.

Both of these serve as preparation for the more pronounced shift in point of view in the next shot. We see a view of the street from inside the stable on the other side of the road. An unfamiliar gunman cocks his rifle, steps back and aims through the window. Through the window we see Wheeler walking into view, preceded by his shadow. When Wheeler steps into the gunman’s sights, he is shot down [see *Illustrations, Fig. 2.7*]. The brief moment of anticipation, in which the rifle is cocked and Wheeler is allowed to approach, is facilitated by the shift in point of view. We are given information that Chance, Dude and Wheeler himself lack. Beyond providing a moment of effective suspense, the fact that we are permitted to know that Wheeler is about to be shot emphasises the premeditated nature of the killing, and in turn, the pervasive scope of Nathan Burdette’s influence. It also conveys a

sense of powerlessness, onto Chance and Dude as well as Wheeler. No one is able to prevent, or even anticipate the shooting. Instead, it proceeds with apparent inevitability.

This quality comes less from any degree of fatalism than from its deliberate and careful organisation. An illuminating point of contrast here is the murder for which Joe Burdette is being held. In the opening scene of the film, Joe shoots a man in the stomach for intervening when he was punching Dude. The perfunctory manner in which he does so is underlined by the musical score. Melodic “stingers” accompany the blows Joe lands on Dude, accentuating their impact. No such musical emphasis is given to the shooting, and Joe just grins and walks away. The prevailing impression we are left with is that the murder was impulsive, the result of a sadistic whim.

In this context, the killing of Wheeler constitutes a significant raising of the stakes. In contrast to Joe’s rash, opportunistic cruelty, it demonstrates the level of knowledge and control possessed by Nathan Burdette and his hired thugs. In order to kill Wheeler in such a way, someone involved had to know where he would be. Since this was a subject of enquiry and speculation between Dude and Chance immediately prior to Wheeler’s death, we can infer that Burdette and his gang have greater access to information than the sheriff and his deputies do. Through the swiftness and precision of the murder, Burdette asserts his power over the town. Crouched over Wheeler’s body, Chance summarises the situation and its implications:

They got him in the back. He's dead. It didn't take 'em long, less than an hour after he offered to help. You don't get many friends like that.

As well as emphasising the speed with which Burdette and his men are able to work, and the increased isolation of the sheriff and his remaining friends, Chance explicitly refers to Wheeler's death as a back-shooting. Wayne delivers the first part of the line with a snarl of disgust, indicating Chance's contempt for the dishonourable violence he suddenly finds himself confronted with. Part of the shock of Wheeler's killing comes from the sense of it as an assault on the familiar – on the streets that Chance patrols and the conventions that he observes. The casting of Ward Bond as Wheeler is another factor in this. Bond was a prolific character actor and a recognisable face from dozens of Westerns. At the time that *Rio Bravo* was released, he would have been especially familiar from his central role in the television series *Wagon Train* (NBC, USA, 1957-1962). To kill his character off so quickly, and after he has played such a limited part in the narrative, disrupts expectations and forces us to reassess what might be possible in the world that the film depicts.

It is significant that Chance refers to Burdette and his gang non-specifically, as a nebulous, undefined "they". The man who shoots Wheeler is presented in a consistently anonymous fashion. He is never seen front-on; when we are allowed to see his face it is only in oblique profile from behind. In a film full of distinctive-looking characters, his features are bland and undistinguished. When he steps back to aim his rifle at Wheeler, he moves into shadow, only his head and hands remaining discernible. When pursued by Chance and

Dude into the Burdette saloon, he hides up in the rafters, again rendered indistinct by the darkness [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 2.8]. The extent to which this unnamed gunman blends into his surroundings makes him seem less like a character and more like an aspect of the environment itself. This can be connected to some of the melancholy tropes that I discussed in the previous chapter, relating to the portrayal of the world as inherently violent. However, this is given a particular inflection by the context of the night-time town. The sense of pervasive and impersonal menace comes from the villains' control over, and willingness to exploit, the opportunities for physical and social concealment (Burdette's men also deny the presence of the gunman when questioned) that the town and its darkness provide.

Against this threat, Chance's conventional Western values and strategies are shown to be inadequate. When Wheeler's killer is still hiding out in the stable, Chance expresses his intention to go in "right through the door" to confront him. Even as he comes to face a different kind of violence, Chance's approach continues to stress open and direct engagement, the overtness and regularity of honour. In the subsequent shooting match, Chance ends up momentarily blinded by dust and the man escapes. The dust in the sheriff's eyes not only demonstrates that the local environment continues to provide advantages to those less concerned with the formal rules of engagement, it also provides a neat riposte to Chance's insistence on directness and visibility. The reassuring coherence that these dimensions could potentially bring to violence is denied.

It is only through Dude that the gunman is apprehended. As a recovering alcoholic, Dude has first-hand knowledge and experience of the town's nocturnal underbelly. By his own regretful admission, he is "an expert on saloons". His understanding of the nocturnal milieu is explicitly linked to the suffering and humiliation he has experienced due to drinking. His sadness and shame give him the melancholic's characteristic insight into the darkness and complexity of the world. When Dude urges Chance to take the back door of the saloon, leaving him to take the front, it is not only for the sake of rebuilding his own self-respect. It is also a means of persuading Chance to compromise his direct approach and be flexible in the face of an opponent superior in numbers and position, and with a total disregard for fair play. The conditions of the town at night are shown to be alien to the upright Chance. In the earlier night-time patrol scene he is startled by a donkey, and admits that he is "getting jumpy". Through his personal experiences of despair and degradation in the night-time town (experiences such as those in the film's opening scene, where he attempts to retrieve a silver dollar from a spittoon in order to buy himself a drink), Dude helps Chance adapt.

The other major function of the night-time town in *Rio Bravo* relates to the expression of containment and restricted space. The narrative of the film revolves around a siege – Chance's attempts to keep Joe Burdette in jail until the federal marshal arrives to take him to trial. This story is structured over a series of days and nights, their passing marked by shots of sunrise and sunset. Solar time is often used in Westerns to lend an elemental dimension to the drama – consider such titles as *Red Sundown* (Jack Arnold, Universal,

USA, 1956), *Rage at Dawn* (Tim Whelan, RKO, USA, 1955) and, most famously, *High Noon*. The night-time scenes in *Rio Bravo*, however, work against this sort of emphasis. Rather than establishing a continuity with the cycles of the natural world, they stress the town's separateness and isolation. The darkness of the night-time town shuts out the surrounding wilderness that we can sometimes see at the edges of town in the daytime. Without it, the world of the Western shrinks. The sense of freedom and grandeur that the landscape often expresses in the genre is circumscribed. This is one of the melancholy aspects of Western towns at night – the suggestion of narrowed or diminished possibilities. In the night-time town, there seems to be less scope for action that might express or affirm something positive. The overall scale of the physical environment is reduced, and the stature of individuals within it. This quality of containment and restriction is what creates the impression of the night-time town as its own distinct and self-contained world. Its different properties of space and atmosphere indicate its separateness from the daytime world. The dawn and dusk shots in *Rio Bravo* make this overt. The scenery around the town disappears at sunset, only to reassert itself in the morning.

The Shooting in the Night-time Town, version 3: *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*

The use of landscape in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is similarly restricted – unusually so, as Pye points out<sup>11</sup>, for a Ford Western. Before proceeding onto this film's night-time shooting sequence, it is worth further examining its use of space. The bulk of the film is set within the town of Shinbone, with several important scenes taking place at night. Aspects of the nocturnal Shinbone can be seen as substituting for the wilderness, in terms of both its emptiness and lack of social control. Indoor scenes, brightly lit and dominated by medium shots, are juxtaposed with scenes emphasising the dark and empty streets that surround these social spaces, inhabited by solitary figures framed in long shot. These can be seen as melancholy variations on the iconic Western shot of the individual against the landscape. In these shots, the solitude of the figure does not convey independence or distinction, but isolation and uncertainty.

An example of this occurs at the end of a conversation between Eastern lawyer Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart), "good Westerner"<sup>12</sup> Tom Doniphon (John Wayne), his intended bride Hallie (Vera Miles) and local newspaperman Dutton Peabody (Edmond O'Brien) in the kitchen of Peter's Place, Shinbone's dining establishment. Having discussed the implications of Ransome remaining in Shinbone despite his run-ins with bandit and sadistic bully Liberty Valance (Lee Marvin), Tom leaves, telling Hallie that he will be "out of town for a while". There then follows a shot from outside, showing Hallie in



the background watching Tom walk out into the shadows [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 2.9]. The depth of the shot dwarfs Hallie, and the kitchen doorway that frames her. She is visually overwhelmed by the darkness. Whilst we have been told that Tom is going out into the countryside, we do not see this. The night-time town functions as shorthand for the wider, more dangerous world outside the safer spaces of social interaction.

Through the sustained use of Shinbone by night, then, the West of *Liberty Valance* is able to be “wild” without appearing to be very large. This can be connected to the film’s framing device – the main narrative is recounted by Ranse some years after it takes place. Whilst the movie does not restrict itself to Ranse’s point of view (there are several scenes where he is not present and one where he is unconscious) our awareness of him as the narrator emphasises that what we are seeing is structured around one man’s personal experience of the West. Again, this suggests a relatively contained and restricted narrative world (Tag Gallagher goes as far as to say that “In a sense, the world beyond does not exist”<sup>13</sup> in the movie). This is particularly relevant in relation to the shooting of Liberty Valance himself.

Valance’s death is shown twice – first as it appeared to Ranse and the people of Shinbone at the time, and then how it really happened, as explained to Ranse by Tom Doniphon. The first time it is presented as a conventional (if extended) face-off, the second time as a concealed, premeditated killing more like that of Wheeler in *Rio Bravo*. The difference between the two is represented spatially. In the first version, where Ranse appears to kill

Valance, a narrow corridor of action is established. This is achieved by staging the gunfight on the veranda of Shinbone's General Store, rather than in the street itself (an early indication that it might not be the honourable public act that it appears to be). The first part of the fight consists of a repeated shot / reverse shot pattern. Subsequently, the same line between the two men is maintained in wider shots by the wooden rail at the edge of the veranda. The pronounced sense of tunnel vision created here reinforces the limited and subjective nature of the first account. It can also be interpreted as a self-conscious comment on the conventions of the gunfight. By keeping the action along one clear line on one side of the street, it appears almost two-dimensional. This makes it seem too simplistic and artificial to function as a moment where significance can be concentrated into an emblematic act of violence. The ritual of the classic face-off is portrayed as reductive and false.

When the truth is revealed in the movie, an additional spatial dimension is added. In the second version of the shooting, we see the face-off from the other side of the street, which had previously been excluded from our view. From an alleyway, Tom Doniphon catches a rifle thrown to him by his servant and companion Pompey (Woody Strode), aims it at Valance and shoots him dead [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 2.10]. The authenticity of this version is emphasised by its foregrounding of three-dimensional space. We see the two men on the veranda sideways-on, at the back of a deep focus shot across the street. The flat plane of the gunfight is situated in a larger and fuller spatial context.

There remain, however, elements of containment and restriction. This is partly created by the narrative context – Tom’s account to Ranse is contained within Ranse’s account to the press. The scene is a flashback within a flashback, giving it an intensified sense of focus and specificity. Whilst it extends and develops the space of the previous account, it is still tightly enclosed. The shot of Tom shooting Valance is bounded on both sides by the edges of the alleyway, their presence accentuated by the positions of Tom and Pompey, to the left and the right of the frame. This level of narrative and spatial encapsulation locates the shooting in the irretrievable past, accessible to us and to the characters only through a series of frames. As an apparently distinct and separate space, the setting of the night-time town adds to this effect.

Our understanding of the second version of events as the truth brings with it a dimension of melancholy. The true account of what happened is presented to us with great emphasis (we are finally finding out what really happened), but also a degree of distance, as a retelling of a retelling, at multiple removes from the world of the present. This gives the killing a quality of fatalistic finality – it is something that has already happened, that cannot be altered or undone. Gallagher describes “The Fordian hero” in the director’s later movies as “a spectator of his own life”<sup>14</sup> and we can see this here. Ranse and Tom can look back on the killing that launched the political career of the former and triggered the decline of the latter, but their relation to it, in retrospect, is passive. They can do nothing about its continuing influence over the course

of their lives. The past is understood in melancholy terms – it is a powerful, vividly recalled presence, but it is also remote and immutable.

These contradictions are developed in the way that the flashback is framed. Its presentation plays on the motifs of darkness and concealment associated with the night-time town. It is introduced by a dissolve, which blends with the smoke from Tom's cigarette to form an obscuring cloud out of which the scene emerges. At first, however, we see nothing. The view of the street is only revealed when the black-clad Tom steps out of the extreme foreground. This is repeated after the shooting, when Tom and Pompey walk back into the alley, blocking the shot once again. The empty middle plane of the street also emphasises that Tom, in the background, watches and shoots from an unobserved distance. There is a contradiction being expressed here. On the one hand, we understand that Tom is telling us the true story of the killing. This is translated, in cinematic terms, into showing us what happened. Tom is making himself and his part in the killing visible. On the other hand, what is being revealed is deception and concealment. Tom displays his hidden role in the death of Liberty Valance. There is a perverse kind of honour to the overtness with which he does this, but that just emphasises the disparity between such public standards and what he has done.

Although Valance's death becomes the basis of Ranse's successful political career, our view of his character is not significantly undermined by the revelation. Rather, it is Tom, and the authentic Western-ness that he seemed to represent, that suffer the most damage. Although Ranse is shown to

benefit from the aftermath of the killing, even in its first version it is depicted as a lucky escape rather than a decisive victory. Ranse shows considerable courage and integrity by confronting Valance, who can shoot with significantly greater speed and accuracy. The uneasy relationship between strength and virtue that Cavell identifies as a source of melancholy in Westerns<sup>15</sup> is intensified here into an almost total polarisation of the two qualities. Ranse is a man of virtue, but he has almost no power in the context of a gunfight. Valance, by contrast, is described by Gallagher as “pure unadulterated violence and chaos without hint of redeeming feature”<sup>16</sup>. We initially experience Ranse’s survival and Valance’s death more in terms of relief than of heroic achievement, but we still admire the Easterner’s fortitude in the face of a seemingly hopeless situation.

Tom, however, is portrayed as both virtuous and strong. We know him to be capable of violence, but we also expect him to have some control over it and to be accountable to standards of fairness and honour in its use. His reasons for back-shooting Valance are noble enough, but by doing so he violates the code of the gunfight; his intervention is, by his own admission, “cold-blooded murder”. Although the murder is consistent with the pragmatism that Tom displays throughout the movie, enough is invested in his status as at least a potential Western hero for it still to constitute a fall from grace. His confidence, competence and decency all contribute to this, but most crucial is the star persona of John Wayne. Whilst this does not necessarily guarantee a heroic character, it does strongly suggest overtness and transparency of action. Deborah Thomas describes Wayne as “a star whose meaning is

profoundly corporeal”<sup>17</sup>. He expresses himself in terms of tangible physical substance; he embodies the values of the characters he plays. These need not be sympathetic, but we expect them to be evident in his action and his bearing. Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* may not be a very nice chap, but you will not find him hiding in the shadows, either.

Retrospectively, Ranse comes closer to embodying the values of the Western gunfight. His chivalry, which is gently mocked by Tom (“Well, Pompey, looks like we’ve got ourselves a ladies’ man”) is not of the ostentatious sort practised by Hatfield in *Stagecoach*; it is obvious enough to be clear, but no more. He also insists to Tom with some vehemence that “Nobody fights my battles.” And yet, as Pye observes, “iconographically and in other ways, he remains emphatically of the East.”<sup>18</sup> His “Western” values are not an integral part of the West that he inhabits, which is more accurately represented by the night-time town, with its hidden dangers and thin veneer of civilisation. This contrast can best be seen in the different ways Ranse and Tom inhabit the night-time streets. Just before the first time we see him confront Valance, Ranse wanders the darkened streets of Shinbone, peering in through the window of the newspaper office where Peabody is receiving medical attention after being badly beaten [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 2.11]. This action emphasises Ranse’s separateness and isolation – he does not belong. In the street, a combination of his white apron and some backlighting ensures that his outline remains distinct. Tom, however, repeatedly blends into the shadows. In the scene I mentioned earlier when he is watched by Hallie from the kitchen door, and later when he shoots Valance, his black clothing makes it more difficult to

work out where he ends and the surrounding darkness begins. Tom is aligned with the night-time town from the first time we see him, transporting the battered Ranse into Shinbone at half past five in the morning. Tom's Western-ness and the town's reflect and reinforce one another – they share each other's darkness.

*Stagecoach* – a melancholy sense of possibility

Tom is *Liberty Valance*'s emblematic Westerner, and the night-time town is its emblematic West. It is the location in which we discover the truth about the world of the past. It is offered to us, then, as the harsh reality of a particular time and place. Ford used the night-time town to exemplify a similar melancholy truth 23 years earlier in *Stagecoach*. The final scenes of the movie take place in the town of Lordsburg at night, where the stagecoach carrying the main characters has arrived. Although they reach safety and stability (of sorts) in Lordsburg after the dangers of the wilderness they have passed through, their arrival is experienced as a return to the tribulations of the ordinary world. The possibilities for transformation and redemption that developed over the events of the journey seem to recede in the town.

This is most clearly demonstrated by the treatment of the film's heroine, Dallas (Claire Trevor), who it is strongly implied works as a prostitute. At the start of the film, Dallas is forced out of the town of Tonto by the "Law and Order League", a priggish pressure group (Slotkin calls them a "lynch mob"<sup>19</sup>) formed by the town's older, more prosperous women to enforce the

maintenance of decorum. She is initially treated with the same contemptuous hauteur on the coach, particularly by Lucy Mallory, the pregnant wife of a cavalry officer, who seems to regard Dallas with a kind of visceral disgust. As the journey progresses, however, Mrs. Mallory is forced to acknowledge Dallas' kindness and strength. When Mrs. Mallory gives birth at the Apache Wells swing-station, Dallas cares for her and the baby, and she continues to look after the child for the remainder of the journey, cradling it close to her even when the Apaches attack. When the women get to Lordsburg, however, it quickly becomes clear that Mrs. Mallory's respect for Dallas, however sincere, cannot be meaningfully expressed now that they are back in an environment where the social divisions between them are reasserted.

As soon as Dallas arrives, she is surrounded by a group of women whose haughty expressions and grim yet gaudy clothes resemble those of the Law and Order League. A nurse briskly snatches the baby away from her. Mrs. Mallory, who is being taken away on a stretcher to recover with her wounded husband, calls Dallas over. We see Mrs. Mallory in close-up, looking up at Dallas [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 2.12]. She says, "If there's ever anything I can do for..." and then checks herself before she can finish the sentence. Her eyes fall and her lips tighten in acknowledgement of the fact that she can promise Dallas nothing, not even future recognition, if she wants to maintain the conventions of her social class. Dallas smiles sadly and says, "I know" [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 2.13], showing that she understands both the kind intentions behind the aborted offer and its impossibility in social terms. Dallas' friendly but hopeless acceptance of Mrs. Mallory's gesture conveys a strong



sense of melancholy. In a final act of nurturing, she puts her shawl over Mrs. Mallory to warm her and then steps back into space as the people around her start to move away. The camera stays with her for a moment as she retrieves her purse and dusts off her hat. This emphasises not only Dallas' isolation but its familiar qualities – her actions are those of a woman returning home from a trip. This puts the sense of diminished possibilities, of lost hope, conveyed in the exchange with Mrs. Mallory into the context of the resumption of everyday life.

For Dallas, everyday life is the night-time town. It is her world – even her name suggests that she belongs to the urban milieu, and her job and social status place her on the dark side of it. The night-time town (not necessarily this one, but an equivalent environment) has shaped her attitudes and expectations, forming the basis for the melancholy she expresses at various points in the movie. This can be seen in the ways in which certain characteristics of Lordsburg by night seem to correspond to aspects of her sadness. Dallas' pessimism, her unwillingness to entertain hopeful possibilities, which we see most obviously in the trepidation with which she treats her romantic relationship with the Ringo Kid, is mirrored in the sense of social and spatial restriction in the town. I have already discussed how the darkness of the night-time town makes its spaces seem smaller and more confined; in Lordsburg this effect is intensified by a frequently cluttered *mise-en-scène*. Buildings seem to surround and impinge on the frame, and as Slotkin observes, "Ford fills the streets with such crowds of people that even the open spaces have a claustrophobic quality."<sup>20</sup> The crowds also help

create the impression of a lack of privacy in the town, which reflects and intensifies the shame that Dallas exhibits. Even when the crowds cannot be seen, we can still hear sound spilling out of the town's various saloons, indicating the constant and invasive presence of people. The sense of exposure and public scrutiny that this conveys is succinctly expressed by the fact that Ringo is spotted as soon as he arrives in town by friends of the Plummer brothers, whom he has come to Lordsburg to kill.

Dallas is at her most exposed and vulnerable when Ringo insists that she let him walk her home. Their walk back through the dark streets is one of the parts of the Lordsburg section of the movie that has received the most critical attention – Perez maintains that the sequence has “at least as much prominence” as a “climactic gunfight.”<sup>21</sup> Its power and intensity come from Dallas' fear that she is revealing her true nature to Ringo, that his love for her relies on an ignorance of what she does and where she comes from. She is afraid that when Ringo sees the grotesque and tawdry world that she is forced to inhabit, this world will irrevocably alter his view of her and will come to represent her to him. The sad paradox as it appears to Dallas is that the worse her world seems, the less chance she will have to escape it with Ringo.

She spends much of the walk staring straight ahead, as if scared to acknowledge what is around her. Despite her protestations, Ringo insists on seeing her all the way home, and their surroundings get bleaker the further they go – Slotkin likens it to “a journey into hell.”<sup>22</sup> The sounds that, in the characteristic style of the night-time town, can be heard from the doorways of

the saloons and brothels that they pass, create an atmosphere of despair. We hear laughter and music, but without the comfort and positivity that they would usually imply – the laughter is an unhinged cackle and the upright piano and creaking fiddle are out of tune enough to sound uncomfortable. The smoothness of the tracking shots that follow the couple as they walk is broken up as they pass through bands of light and shadow. The sense of nervous vacillation that this creates emphasises the fact that this is a crucial tipping point for Dallas, that, as Gallagher summarises, “her whole life is at stake”<sup>23</sup>.

Ringo, however, remains constant in his affections. The reassurances he offers Dallas – “We ain’t never going to say goodbye”; “I asked you to marry me, didn’t I?” – stress the two of them as a couple, apart from any particular environment or context. It has been noted that it is unclear whether Ringo understands and accepts that Dallas has worked as a prostitute or whether he simply fails to grasp the implications of what he sees. We know he went to jail when he was very young, so it is possible that he is socially and sexually inexperienced enough not to fully understand. As Gallagher puts it, “We are not sure whether Ringo is noble or stupid”<sup>24</sup>. However, it makes little practical difference which of these is actually the case. The important point is that a positive resolution to the situation that the couple faces can only be achieved by disregarding the context of the night-time town. It is portrayed in such a vivid and extended manner as a world of hopeless melancholy that happy possibilities can only exist if it is ignored or negated. This can also be seen in the film’s ending, where Curley (George Bancroft), the marshal who had been

intending to take Ringo back to prison, lets him and Dallas escape the town in a buckboard.

It can also be seen more subtly in Ringo's confrontation with the Plummer brothers. This is set up as a near impossible undertaking for Ringo – he is outnumbered three to one and only has the three bullets that he secretly saved during the Apache attack. This situation is compounded by the setting of the night-time town, and its associations of hidden guns and unfair fights. We see that Luke Plummer is carrying a pistol. Doc Boone manages to stop him taking a shotgun out to face Ringo by threatening him with a murder charge, but a saloon girl throws a rifle down to Luke from a shadowy balcony when he steps into the street. Although the Plummers also face some bad omens – we see Luke holding the “dead man's hand” in poker and Hank Plummer (Vester Pegg) is spooked by a black cat – these supernatural indications seem less relevant to the grim but ordinary world represented by Lordsburg. The staff of the town's newspaper starts to prepare an article on Ringo's death, as if it were a foregone conclusion. The sense of limitation and reduced possibilities in the town is reasserted in the lead-up to the gunfight through a series of particularly enclosed framings. This confinement intensifies as the confrontation approaches – when Ringo and the Plummers meet, it is at a narrowing of the street caused by verandas jutting out on each side [see *Illustrations, Fig. 2.14*]. The setting that the film establishes for the face-off is not a hopeful one. It hardly seems conducive to Ringo defying the odds and delivering an exceptional and meaningful display of violence.

Thus, in order for Ringo to emerge victorious, the film has to find a way to overcome the restrictions of this melancholy context. It does this by cutting away at the moment the fight begins. I have already referred to this moment in the previous chapter, in terms of its use of the conventions of the gunfight as a fair and equal contest. I would now like to suggest that these conventions are incongruous in the context that the film gives us, so they have to be implied rather than expressed directly. We see Ringo step out into the streetlight to face the Plummers, his steps “Mickey Moused” (musically accentuated)<sup>25</sup> by the soundtrack, his stature emphasised by the low camera angle. He dives towards the camera, firing his rifle as he drops to the ground [see *Illustrations, Fig. 2.15*], and the movie cuts to Dallas, whom Ringo has asked to wait for him outside her dwelling, reacting to the sound of gunshots. What we see of the start of the fight does enough to establish Ringo as heroic and honourable – facing his enemies with the emphatic directness expressed by his dive into the foreground – without actually giving us a clear indication of how he manages to kill three men with three bullets and walk away unscathed. Buscombe argues that Ringo’s victory is “believable only because we don’t actually witness it.”<sup>26</sup> It would be difficult to actually *show* him killing the Plummers in any way we could accept as plausible, especially given the expectations encouraged by the setting.

The importance of the setting becomes more apparent if we compare the gunfight to earlier scenes of action in the film. The river crossing at Lee’s Ferry and especially the Apache attack on the coach, with its daring stunt-work<sup>27</sup>, are given vivid and extended visual treatment. In these sequences,

sustained attention is paid to what the characters do to solve the problems they face. We see floats being fitted to the sides of the coach, and we see Ringo climbing out into the team of galloping horses to bring the leaders back under control. But all of this takes place out in the wilderness, which is represented as a space of greater freedom and possibilities, including those of effective, meaningful action. In order to achieve the same thing in Lordsburg, an element of sleight of hand is required. The melancholy terms of the night-time town are refused outright by omitting the action and skipping straight to its effects.

The wilderness is the characteristic location of the movie. As Gallagher notes, “When we think of *Stagecoach* we think of a coach traversing a giant vista of Monument Valley.”<sup>28</sup> It is the setting for the majority of the narrative, and the most visually distinctive backdrop that the film provides. Within its distinctiveness, however, there is also a dimension of strangeness. Many critical accounts of *Stagecoach* remind us that it established Monument Valley as an iconic location for Ford’s Westerns<sup>29</sup>. Although Buscombe points out that Ford’s use of the Valley has its precedents both in film<sup>30</sup> and in other media such as painting and photography<sup>31</sup>, it is still fair to say that in 1939 it was relatively unfamiliar to movie audiences. This quality is part of what makes it work as a place of new or extended possibilities, where the passengers of the stagecoach can overcome social restrictions and act in a unimpeded, even heroic manner. It suggests the mythic conception of the frontier as a site of renewal. Slotkin argues that the “peculiarity” of Monument Valley “effectively represents the alien quality of the Frontier – which had

been in its time as uncanny a place for pioneers as a moonscape might be.”<sup>32</sup>

The combination of expansive desert and huge, abstractly-shaped rock formations gives the impression of an empty, partially-formed world full of potential, where the freedom still exists to pursue many different directions.

It is in contrast to this world that the night-time Lordsburg needs to be understood, not just in terms of its atmosphere of confinement and pessimism, but also in its greater familiarity. Slotkin makes this point, remarking that the towns we see at the start and end of the film “resemble familiar studio or backlot spaces whose like we have seen in a hundred “B” movies.”<sup>33</sup> These spaces are likely to have been more recognisable to a contemporary audience than Monument Valley was. This is what gives the night-time town its melancholy force in the movie. It is an environment that we know, and can understand in terms of the iconography of the genre. Its familiarity gives it a coherence and depth – we are able to accept that what we see of the darkness and despair of the night-time town is representative of a larger, fuller world. This sense of a believable reality coloured with sadness is what makes the town melancholy.

I have concluded this chapter with a discussion of *Stagecoach* because its stark juxtaposition of the daytime wilderness and the night-time town clearly demonstrates their status as parallel worlds in which different things are possible. It also helps to emphasise the Western-ness of the night-time town – the wilderness may be the movie’s emblematic West, but the town draws on more established generic conventions. I have demonstrated that some of the

conventions of the genre – in particular, those concerning violence – can be altered and disrupted by this setting, but it is also important to remember that the night-time town still sits comfortably within Western iconography. It is able to exist within the generic world of the West, and also stand apart from it. This is what allows it to function as a melancholy counterpart to this world, in which familiar elements can be viewed through a different sensibility.

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Walker, 'The Westerns of Delmer Daves', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western*, p. 160.

<sup>2</sup> Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (London / New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) p.293.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Walker, 'Film Noir: Introduction', in Ian Cameron (ed.), *The Movie Book of Film Noir* (London: Studio Vista, 1992), p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> David Lusted, 'Social class and the Western as male melodrama' in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western*, p. 72.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Britton, 'Pursued – A reply to Paul Willemen', *Framework* 4, Summer 1976, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 123.

<sup>9</sup> Robin Wood, *Rio Bravo* (London: BFI, 2003), p. 43.

<sup>10</sup> For a more extended analysis of point of view in another scene in *Rio Bravo*, see Douglas Pye, 'Movies and Point Of View', *Movie* 36, 2000, pp. 4-12.

<sup>11</sup> Douglas Pye, 'Genre and History: *Fort Apache* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*' in Cameron and Pye (eds.) *The Movie Book of the Western*, p. 119.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>13</sup> Tag Gallagher, *John Ford: the man and his films* (Berkeley / Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), p. 391.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 384.

<sup>15</sup> See my Introduction to Melancholy, pp. 69-70 and Chapter 1, p. 95.

<sup>16</sup> Gallagher, *John Ford: the man and his films*, p. 396.

<sup>17</sup> Deborah Thomas, 'John Wayne's Body', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western*, p. 75.

<sup>18</sup> Pye, 'Genre and History-: *Fort Apache* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*', p. 122.

<sup>19</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 306.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 310.

<sup>21</sup> Perez, *The Material Ghost*, p. 238.

<sup>22</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 310.



---

<sup>23</sup> Gallagher, *John Ford: the man and his films*, p. 151.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>25</sup> See Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (London: BFI, 1987), p. 88.

<sup>26</sup> Buscombe, *Stagecoach*, p. 75.

<sup>27</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>28</sup> Gallagher, *John Ford: the man and his films*, p. 146.

<sup>29</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 146, Buscombe, *Stagecoach*, pp. 39-40 and Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 305.

<sup>30</sup> Buscombe, *Stagecoach*, p. 39.

<sup>31</sup> See Buscombe, 'Inventing Monument Valley: Nineteenth Century Landscape Photography and the Western Film'.

<sup>32</sup> Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 305.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 305.

### Chapter 3: Old Men

The stock figure of the old man can act as a melancholy double to the Western hero, much like the night-time town can in relation to the broader world of the West. The old man, typically grizzled and loquacious, is a familiar and recognisable part of the Western milieu<sup>1</sup>. A number of Westerns place their hero in a significant relationship with an old man, emphasising a sense of similarity or connection between the two characters. Through this, aspects of the Western hero are shown to us in a different context, that of a less assured and powerful character. The traits the hero shares with the old man are reflected back onto him in a way that suggests their potential pitfalls and limitations. The significance of the old man's age is not simply to indicate the inevitable decay that comes with time, but to point to a possible future for the hero himself. He can represent the extension of tendencies implied in the hero, or the failure of the potential he displays.

I will start by exploring the common background shared by the Western hero and his older counterpart. Next, I will consider some of the ways in which old men as supporting characters are used to inflect our understanding of the hero. In particular, I will examine the relationship between hero and old man in two Westerns from 1948: *Blood on the Moon* and *Yellow Sky*. I will then look at two later Westerns that take the connection further by putting old men in more central roles: *Man of the West*, in which the villain is an old man, and *Ride the High Country*, in which the roles of old man and hero are combined.

### The Old Man and the Western Hero – background

One of the earliest versions of the figure that would become the Western hero was an old man. This figure was developed in one of the genre's major antecedents, James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking novels. The character of Leatherstocking himself, Natty Bumppo, is regarded as a key precursor to the Western hero, with his skills with violence and unease with the mainstream of civilisation. Whilst the Leatherstocking novels deal with episodes from various points across half a century of Natty Bumppo's life, the first to be published, *The Pioneers*, introduces the character as, in Slotkin's description, "an old man on the verge of decrepitude"<sup>2</sup>. Henry Nash Smith argues that this becomes a defining aspect of our understanding of Bumppo: "the persistent image of the hunter was that of his first appearance, as a man of venerable age."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Leatherstocking shows many of the characteristics that will come to be associated with old men in Hollywood Westerns. One particular example is his stylised, dialect-heavy mode of speech. Consider this extract of dialogue from *The Pioneers*:

...I am a plain, unlarned man, that has sarved both the king and his country, in his day, ag'in the French and savages, but never so much as looked into a book, or larnt a letter of scholarship, in my born days.<sup>4</sup>

It requires little imagination to conceive of similar lines being spoken by an old man in a Western movie, perhaps one played by Walter Brennan, whose toothless, heavily accented speech made him well suited to this sort of role.

Interestingly, Smith suggests that it is the two characteristics of advanced age and colloquial speech (or rather, the lower-class origins implied by this style of speaking), which caused Cooper problems in presenting Natty Bumppo as a hero:

It is at this point that Cooper's reluctance to break with the conventions of the sentimental novel becomes most glaringly apparent. A novel, according to canons which he considered binding, was a love story. The hero of the novel was the man who played the male lead in the courtship.<sup>5</sup>

The generic conventions that Cooper was working within demanded a hero that was younger and from a more privileged social background than the grizzled old hunter, so that this hero could be paired with a noble or bourgeois heroine. This led Cooper to split the heroic role in several of the novels between Leatherstocking and a series of younger male characters of less humble origins, who "were more easily converted into lovers."<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that, even at this early stage in the development of the Western genre, the old man character brings with him a sense of restriction, an implicit understanding that there are things he cannot do and possibilities he cannot fulfil. This is what makes him an appropriate figure for the expression of melancholy.

By the mid-twentieth century, the dynamic of the relationship between the two characters had shifted, but the pairing of the older frontiersman and younger romantic lead remained a recurring feature of Westerns. It is a common enough device, as Lusted suggests (noting its literary precedents), for the "laconic, more youthful hero" to have "a garrulous old-timer"<sup>7</sup> as a companion.

Character actors like Brennan and Gabby Hayes, who partnered Roy Rogers in a large number of films, spent a good part of their careers playing this sort of role. Although Hollywood Westerns were not accountable to the same narrative conventions as Cooper, the younger man was still easier to accommodate as a hero. He was more glamorous, fitted more readily into a romantic couple and was more convincing in physical action. More of Leatherstocking's qualities – of toughness, competence and solitude – became attached to the younger characters, but they also persisted (in a more muted form) in the old men. Other attributes, particularly speech and physical appearance, were inflected comically. Buscombe refers to the “comic old man” as “an institution”<sup>8</sup> within the Western genre. This is also an important factor in the often close relationship between Western heroes and old men. The comic sidekick, as Stanfield observes in relation to 1930s musical Westerns, can be used to address issues that cannot be confronted directly through the figure of the hero<sup>9</sup>. The frequently broad and exaggerated characterisation of old men in Westerns sometimes functions in a similar way. Because less seems to rest on our opinion of them, old men can be used to articulate more troubling themes and ideas.

Another context in which the connection between the figures of the Western hero and the old man can be observed is that of Country music. The personae of the rural “old-timer” and the Western cowboy have both been widely used by Country performers seeking to project an authentically folksy and regional image, with Southern musicians adopting Western names and costumes<sup>10</sup>, and even young performers pretending to be old<sup>11</sup>. As I have

already noted, Western imagery came into the mainstream of Country music in the 1930s<sup>12</sup>, outstripping the previously dominant old-timer image<sup>13</sup> without replacing it entirely. Peterson suggests that the Western aesthetic in Country music evolved out of the figure of the old-timer, referring to the cowboy as his “offspring”<sup>14</sup>, who developed and extended his appeal. The cowboy was able to embody the same rough authenticity as the old-timer whilst being more musically versatile, less beholden to folk music traditions. Peterson also makes a connection between the old-timer persona and earlier frontier figures:

If the music had been commercialised in 1823, rather than a century later, the image would have been that of the leatherstocking mountaineer as depicted in the frontier novels of James Fenimore Cooper and personified in the stories about Daniel Boone.<sup>15</sup>

Traces of such figures, he argues, can still be detected in the way that the “old geezer”<sup>16</sup> performers of early country music were promoted. Thus, we can see the representations of the old man and the Westerner in popular culture repeatedly informing and influencing one another. The old man is a significant element in the background of the Western hero, as we understand him.

### *Blood on the Moon – a moment of role-reversal*

The ways in which the characters of the old man and the hero can overlap and intersect can be seen in *Blood on the Moon*. The movie invites a number of comparisons between its protagonist, Jim Garry (Robert Mitchum), and Kris Barden (Walter Brennan), an old homesteader who becomes his ally. The

point where this is most apparent is when Jim rides away from the town of Sundust, around which the movie is set, in disgust at the manipulation of the local farmers by his friend Tate Riling (Robert Preston). Garry has been made complicit in Riling's schemes, which have resulted in the death of Barden's son (George Cooper), his only surviving relative, in a skirmish between cattlemen and homesteaders. Stopping for a drink in the nearby town of Commissary, Jim encounters Barden. He initially assumes that the old man was looking for him, perhaps wanting revenge on someone connected with the people who caused his son's death, but Barden gruffly asserts that he "ain't looking for nobody". Kris then walks outside and encounters Riling, who is looking for Jim. In close succession, Riling asks both Barden and Garry what they are doing in Commissary. Both men give variations on the same answer: Barden is "leaving the country" and Jim is "running out".

These remarks, coupled with Barden's earlier answer to Jim, suggest that at this stage the two men share a lack of purpose beyond the basic impulse to get away. Whilst this is perfectly understandable with the grieving Barden, who is portrayed as having very little reason to want to do anything at this point, Garry's position is more ambiguous. On the one hand, he is driven by guilt and self-contempt at his involvement with Riling. On the other, he has just saved cattleman John Lufton (Tom Tully) and his daughter Amy (Barbara Bel Geddes) from being killed by Riling's henchmen, Shotten (Clifton Young) and Reardon (Tom Tyler). He has demonstrated his ability to make a significant difference in the conflict around Sundust, so we get a sense that by

leaving he is abandoning a responsibility. He will, of course, return to the fight shortly, this time on the right side, but his temporary loss of purpose connects him to Barden. In his avoidance of action, the Western hero seems weary and diminished, more similar than we might expect to a sad old man.

The parallels between the characters are expressed in a different way shortly afterwards, when Jim fights Riling in the Commissary saloon. Once Jim has beaten his opponent into submission, Reardon intervenes. Before he can shoot Jim, though, Reardon is shot from behind by Barden. Whilst this is a back-shooting, in this context it is not presented as a cowardly or devious act. Kris is rescuing Jim, who is unarmed and about to be shot after winning a fair fight. There is also the mitigating element of revenge and our sense of Barden as the underdog in a confrontation with a professional gunman like Reardon. When the old man is revealed as the shooter, we see him standing near the door of the saloon with his back straight, his stance wide and his hands by his hips – in a classic gunfighter pose [see *Illustrations, Fig. 3.1*]. The low camera angle makes him look uncharacteristically imposing; he is temporarily transformed into a different, more authoritative type of character. This is also reflected in the dialogue. He delivers the kind of terse, direct gunpoint instructions one might expect to hear from a heroic character, saying “Hold it. Give him time,” to the Mexican barman (Chris-Pin Martin), and twice telling Jim to “get out.” The scene ends with Kris watching Jim go, tightly framed in an unusual rear close-up [see *Illustrations, Fig. 3.2*]. Enough of Barden’s profile is visible that we are not simply invited to stare at the back of his head, but not so much that we have his face to concentrate on. Without



his distinctively wizened features, we are left with a more general impression, created by what we can see – his hat, his neckerchief, his stillness of posture and outward pointing stare. The scene fades out on what amounts to an iconic silhouette. From our position, Kris Barden could momentarily pass for a Western hero.

This moment of role-reversal is melancholy in a number of respects. It emphasises Garry's vulnerability – he staggers out of the saloon in physical disarray, bruised and sweating, his hair falling into his eyes, in contrast to the stark definition of Barden's outline. While Barden seems to gain in status, Jim is stripped of the distinctiveness and composure of a hero. He seems fragile and ordinary, especially in contrast to the forceful physical confidence he previously showed in rescuing the Luftons. This is part of a wider pattern in the movie, in which we are offered indications of both Jim's heroic prowess and its limitations. We see him in displays of action – his skill with a gun, for example, is demonstrated when he shoots off Amy Lufton's boot heel – but we also see him repeatedly suffer various kinds of wounds and physical damage.

Jim's vulnerability is linked to his solitude. At the start of the movie, he rides into the area around Sundust alone and we quickly see him lose most of his possessions when his campfire is trampled by stampeding cattle. We also learn that he previously had his own herd of cattle, but he lost them to the fever. Garry's heroic attributes of independence and self-assertion also leave him exposed, and his position on his own never seems entirely assured. Our

sense of his power and ability remains (Jim is still clearly presented as the hero of the movie, and Mitchum is its biggest star), but it is tinged with a melancholy element of uncertainty. Even if we do not ultimately see him fail, we are at least invited to imagine the possibility.

The old man's side of the role-reversal is also placed in a melancholy context. Although Barden is ennobled by his temporary assumption of a heroic mantle, his actions are presented as a retaliation for the death of his son. Although it offered to us as having positive results, his killing of Reardon is not a purposeful intervention in the wider conflict but rather an impulsive response to loss. This gives it a quality of desperation, which is emphasised by his somewhat indiscriminate choice of target. He shoots Reardon not because he killed his son – young Barden was actually shot by Lufton's foreman, Cap Willis (Bud Osborne) – but because Reardon is one of the hired guns whose arrival marked the escalation in hostilities that his son's death was a part of. As Kris explains to Jim, "I always wanted to shoot one of you, and he was the handiest." Barden's speech, posture and expression in the scene, although controlled and authoritative, suggest strong emotions kept in check. His voice is clipped and severe, the occasional louder or drawn-out syllable hinting at anger or disgust. There is tension in his slow, deliberate movements, and his wide eyes and narrow mouth still register sadness. His strong individual presence also makes him a solitary figure – he dominates the scene but looks isolated and small in the space and depth of the shot. We are reminded that he is alone, and brought back to a sense of his loss.

### Stasis and Place

Solitude, then, is another characteristic that Jim Garry and Kris Barden share. Often in Westerns, this is combined with a compensatory dimension of freedom and mobility. The man alone is also unconstrained by the restrictions and obligations of society and free to go where he pleases. In *Blood on the Moon*, this consolation is largely refused. The characters remain within a limited geographical area and are drawn back in if they move away. This happens repeatedly with Jim, who rides out several times but is always compelled to come back. Barden's attempt to move on is also short-lived. His return is linked to both his age and his solitude. As he explains to Amy Lufton, "I guess I've lived around here a little too long. Get kinda lonesome." He is faced with a choice between two versions of solitude: he can either leave the area on his own, or continue to live there, also alone. There is little comfort in his choice of the more familiar option. The melancholy here comes from his acceptance of limitation, his loyalty to a world where the choices have already been made and the potential has already been exhausted.

This implication is clear in Barden's return because we have already seen the kind of world he inhabits, exemplified by his small homestead. Barden's home is introduced in a scene prior to the confrontation in Commissary in which Jim Garry comes to tell the old man that his son has been killed the previous night. We first see the house in a wide shot of the surrounding landscape, as Jim rides down towards it [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 3.3]. It is depicted in familiar generic terms: a solitary farmhouse down in the river

basin, dwarfed by the mountains behind it, with a single plume of smoke extending from its chimney. The length of the shot makes the house look very small. It seems lonely and exposed, but it also has a friendly, pastoral quality. It gently asserts a human presence without jarring with the surrounding landscape. When we see it more closely, tucked into the corner of the next shot, we can see that this is partly because of the trees and bushes that have grown up around it. Just as the chimney smoke implies the continuity of human habitation, this suggests that the house has been there for some time. The principle first impression given by Barden's home is that of being, for better or worse, settled. It seems established and permanent, a place where little is likely to change.

This impression is extended to Kris Barden himself, as the old man's grief at his son's death is set against his ongoing domestic routines. When Jim rides in, he finds Barden drawing water from the well, the squeak of the wheel contributing to our sense of the house's age. This household chore frames the whole conversation – although Barden pauses several times, it is the completion of the task that signals the end of the exchange, as the old man trudges inside with his full bucket.

The points at which he pauses and resumes his activity are significant. He does not stop what he is doing to greet Jim, offering instead a surly "Well, what do you want?" whilst still turning the wheel. His first pause occurs in anticipation of bad news when Jim mentions his son. When the news is delivered, we cut from Jim on horseback to a much tighter medium shot of

Barden. For a few seconds, the look on the old man's face is one of raw, wide-eyed grief [see *Illustrations, Fig. 3.4*]. This flash of vulnerability in Brennan's performance is the most striking aspect of the whole scene, but it is just a flash, as Barden looks back down at the well and starts turning the wheel again. This gesture, rather than signalling a level of comfort in the familiar, suggests a deep resignation on Barden's part that his life is, and will continue to be, a certain way. This is also emphasised in the dialogue. Turning back to the well, Barden responds to the news as if it simply confirmed something he already knew: "I figured maybe that's what happened when he, when he didn't come home."

Shortly afterwards, the old man puts his son's death in the context of his ongoing life in the area: "I've lived here more than half my life, with my wife and my son. She died about four years ago and now, now he's gone." As well as emphasising how long Barden has spent in one place, this also conveys a melancholy sense of time, characterised primarily in terms of the losses that it brings. The defining landmarks of his life in this place have been the deaths of his wife and son – we are offered nothing else of note which might represent his existence in more positive terms. There is little that suggests the progress and development often associated with homesteaders. Any prospect for the continuation of the family died with young Barden, and growth in material terms also seems unlikely – everything that was built by Barden looks like it was built a long time ago. The world that Barden inhabits – and the world that he returns to, for want of anywhere else to go – is one of stasis and decay.

The close association of an old man with a particular locale can also be seen in *Yellow Sky*. In both movies, the old man is linked to a place that offers little promise of change or renewal, and which he himself appears to be unwilling or unable to leave. In *Yellow Sky*, these qualities are given particular prominence by the distinctive character of this location. Yellow Sky itself is a remote and abandoned mining settlement, whose only remaining inhabitants are an old man known simply as “Grandpa” (James Barton) and his granddaughter, Constance Mae (Anne Baxter), who is generally called by the nickname “Mike”. Like Barden’s homestead, it is presented to us through recognisable Western conventions, in this case those of the ghost town<sup>17</sup>. It is immediately recognisable as such when James “Stretch” Dawson (Gregory Peck), the bank robber who will emerge as the film’s hero, and his gang arrive in town. The visual image of the ghost town is formed out of a combination of emptiness and disrepair, and both of these qualities are apparent straight away. The town’s unoccupied main street is tufted with weeds and flanked by buildings with worn paintwork, collapsed verandas and doors hanging off their hinges [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 3.5].

We understand the ghost town as a place of failed settlement, where something in the past has happened to prevent or discourage continued occupation. As Buscombe indicates, this is frequently shown to be some sort of economic collapse: “ghost towns are usually mining towns, deserted when their seam played out.”<sup>18</sup> Scott Simmon points out the real historical basis for this trope, and suggests that ghost towns in Westerns remind us that the prosperity brought by gold and silver rushes can be fragile and fleeting:

As the ghost town setting of *Yellow Sky* melodramatises, late-nineteenth-century southwestern mining towns were usually not simply boom-towns but boom-*and*-bust-towns. Tombstone, recall, had grown rapidly to a population of perhaps eight thousand by the time of the 1881 O.K. Corral shootout – but was down again to fewer than two thousand residents by the 1890 census.<sup>19</sup>

The melancholy of ghost towns like the one in *Yellow Sky* comes from the lingering signs of the optimism with which they were founded, juxtaposed with the desolation that has taken them over. This is overtly displayed in the movie by the dilapidated, half-fallen sign that Stretch and his gang encounter at the town limits, which says “Yellow Sky: Fastest Growing Town in the Territory”. It is clear that growth of any kind in the town has long since come to an end.

This is the context in which we understand Grandpa. His ongoing commitment to the town – his granddaughter refers to his dream of seeing it “come to life again” – is portrayed as a lost cause. Like Kris Barden, his loyalty to a place confines him. Our sense of his confinement increases as the film goes on – he spends much of the second half of the movie laid up in bed recovering from having been shot through the leg, his domain effectively restricted to a few square feet. His main hope for the future lies in the substantial amount of gold that he and Mike have found, and that Stretch and his gang want for themselves. However, the film gives us little indication as to what Grandpa actually intends to do with the gold. We hear about his ambitions to revive the town, and his concern that Mike’s future should be secure, but these plans remain vague and undefined, with no sense as to how they would be achieved. The world of the ghost town is one that has ended,

that has stopped moving forward. In this environment, plans for the future seem abstract and difficult to conceive solidly. The only changes we see in the ghost town are those that are brought in from the outside, first by Stretch and his men, and later by some Apaches. We get the impression that, had their lives not been disrupted, Grandpa and Mike might have continued living in the town and working in their mine indefinitely.

It is important that we see nothing of their ordinary routine before this disruption – this would give the ghost town a more familiar quality and a sense of continuity – but that we understand that this is their first contact with outsiders in some time. Our lack of knowledge of their everyday lives becomes a suggestion that there is nothing to know, that life in the ghost town is empty and unchanging. The suddenness with which both Mike and Grandpa first appear (Mike, in particular, seems to materialise out of nowhere when the gang arrives in town) is striking. It is as if they are brought back into meaningful existence by the arrival of people.

It is only the complications of human interaction that cause any significant change. As I have already indicated, there is no sense that the thousands of dollars' worth of gold they possess has improved, or even altered the lives of Grandpa and Mike. This is one of the ways in which the movie suggests parallels between its hero and its old man character, and presents their similarity in melancholy terms. Both Grandpa and Stretch are in charge of a highly profitable operation (respectively, gold mining and bank robbery) but neither of them is in a position where the money they have made can benefit



them. Early in the movie, we see Stretch and his gang ride into a town and rob its bank. They are pursued by the army, but escape out into the desert, where they are safe to divide up the money. In the desert, however, money has no value. The desert scenes in the movie were shot in the Death Valley National Park in California, famous for being the hottest and driest place in the USA. Water becomes the precious commodity which the men fight over – Walrus (Charles Kemper) regrets filling his canteen with whiskey. They just about manage to survive crossing the desert, but all they find at the other end is the ghost town, where money is just as useless. The old man and the hero are linked by a sense of the futility of their endeavours. The criminal nature of their actions means that Stretch and his men cannot stay in the places where their money would mean something, whilst Grandpa has made his money by remaining in a place where it can do him no good. They represent opposite extremes of stasis and mobility, but both are fatally disconnected from the satisfactions promised by their pursuit of wealth.

Stretch and his gang are overtly presented as outsiders wherever they go. When they arrive in the town whose bank they rob, we find out that they are Union veterans of the Civil War, and it is alleged that the town was “full of Confederate sympathisers during the war”. Whilst characters who fought for the North are by no means unheard of in the genre (for example, Doc Boone in *Stagecoach*), I have already remarked on the frequency with which Westerns give their principal characters a Confederate background<sup>20</sup>. In *Yellow Sky*, the gang’s Civil War past is used to emphasise their lack of connection to the places they pass through. It also puts their greed and

opportunism in a familiar context – that of the carpetbagger. The nicknames of two of the gang also emphasise their outsider status. Bull Run (Robert Arthur), is presumably named after the Civil War battle, and Dude (Richard Widmark) in Western parlance can mean a dandy, an Easterner or a tourist or dabbler in the West (as in “dude ranch”).

Grandpa, by contrast, is a man who belongs to a particular place. As well as his perverse devotion to the ghost town, this is also shown by his friendship with the local Apaches – they accept him as if he too were indigenous to the area. As I have already noted, both *Yellow Sky* and *Blood on the Moon* strongly emphasise the connection between their old man character and where he lives. Whilst this can partly be thought of in terms of the general stereotypes of old age – associations of being settled and stubborn adherence to habits or routines – it is also worth considering some of its wider implications. The old men are the representative figures of each movie’s setting – they embody the immediate world of the movie more fully than the heroes, who come in from elsewhere.

### The West as an Old Place

This offers an insight into the sort of world that many Westerns depict. Among its other qualities, the world presented to us in Westerns is often old. I do not simply mean that it is the world of the past – although we are usually aware of this, it is not always foregrounded. Kim Newman’s observation that Westerns “rarely seemed like costume or historical movies”<sup>21</sup> holds true in

many cases. What I am referring to is the physical world that we see in Westerns, and particularly the sets. Although we sometimes see new dwellings and settlements being built – *My Darling Clementine* is the classic, much-cited example – we are just as frequently presented with weathered wood and crumbling stone, with buildings that look like they have been there for some time. Both Kris Barden's overgrown homestead and Grandpa's ghost town fit into this category, but there are many other examples, such as the run-down shack where Waco Johnny Dean meets up with Dutch Henry Brown in *Winchester '73*.

A number of Westerns even contain ruins. Whilst some of these, like the old Rand place in *Pursued*, suggest only a generation or so of disrepair, others, like those in *Colorado Territory* (Raoul Walsh, Warner Brothers, USA, 1949), seem positively archaeological. The Dobe Corral in *Ride Lonesome*, where the main characters fight off an Indian attack and then bed down for the night, is of indeterminate age and origins, but much of it seems to consist of partially or wholly collapsed stone walls [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 3.6]. However, this attracts no comment from the characters in the movie, nor is any attempt made to explain or contextualise it. It is treated as an unproblematic part of the environment that we see in the film – its presence in the middle of the desert does not seem strange. The generic world of the West is able to accommodate ruins quite comfortably.

The portrayal of the West as old can be inflected in a number of different ways. It can be made to seem primal and mythic, or quaint and historical.

Our sense of its age can be an extension of its familiarity as an established genre (at least in the period I am looking at) – we can believe that a lot has already happened in this place because we have seen it happen in other Westerns. It can also be used to express melancholy. Ruins, of course, have a long-standing association with melancholy. Anne Janowitz notes that “the ruin has been traditionally associated with human and cultural transience.”<sup>22</sup> The image of the ruin has frequently been used to embody the inevitable effects of time, viewed through a melancholy combination of absorption in and detachment from the past. The broader representation of the West as an old place can have a similar significance. It can suggest a less optimistic view of historical progress than that which is often attributed to the genre, a view characterised less by renewal and forward motion than by loss and decay.

### The Hero and the Old Man's World

As I have suggested, the representative figure of this version of the West is the old man, on whom the effects of time are already apparent. The old men in *Blood on the Moon* and *Yellow Sky* embody the melancholy logic of their particular world. Success is not impossible in this world, but it is conceived in narrower terms. In order to succeed, the heroes must give up their excessive ambitions and adapt themselves to the environment. Thus, in both movies we see the hero becoming more like the old man. Their connections to the places they arrived in as a stranger deepen and intensify, and their initially antagonistic relationship with the old man shifts into an alliance.

The change in the hero is shown through the representation of space and mobility. He becomes more confined and less mobile as the film proceeds. This culminates in both movies in a siege situation in the old man's house, in which the hero, the old man and the heroine are surrounded by the hero's former associates: Riling, Shotten and Pindalest (Frank Faylen) in *Blood on the Moon* and Stretch's former gang in *Yellow Sky*. The motif of the siege neatly expresses key dimensions of the change in the hero. We see him confined to a small space, and we also see him fight to defend this space against a group of outsiders to which he used to belong. This indicates his increasing integration into this space and loyalty to it. In both siege scenes the hero is also injured, giving him a degree of physical infirmity that makes him more similar to the old man. The parallel is explicitly drawn in *Yellow Sky* when Grandpa crawls out of bed to share his whiskey with Stretch, who is slumped down on the floor [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 3.7]. The two men are framed broadly symmetrically, both weary, wounded and down on the same physical level. Mike then comes across to put a bandage on Stretch, as she had for her grandfather earlier.

The presence of the heroine is important in these scenes, since the change in the hero also implies a move towards domesticity. The old men in both films are shown to be settled, and to have had a family, even if it is now lost (*Blood on the Moon*) or down to a bare minimum (*Yellow Sky*). Both old men are also presented, with greater or lesser explicitness, as the catalyst for the formation of the couple. In *Yellow Sky*, Grandpa's expressions of concern for Mike's future become more pointedly directed at Stretch. In *Blood on the*

*Moon*, Kris Barden's role in bringing Jim and Amy together is much more overt. As the siege gets underway, he articulates the couple's unspoken feelings for one another, which they then acknowledge.

The hero gains a purpose by entering into the domain of the old man. He finds a place to defend from the marauders with whom he used to ride, and a reason to defend it. The only problem with this is that up to this point in the movie, the associations with the old man's world of settlement and domesticity have been predominantly negative. The hero's progress towards romantic fulfilment and a sense of belonging is linked to the same images of confinement and limitation that have already been used to express the melancholy surrounding the old man: Barden's little homestead, Grandpa recovering in bed, etc.

The endings of the two movies resolve this issue in different ways, both of which retain an element of melancholy. After Jim has managed to break the siege in *Blood on the Moon*, most of the remaining characters gather outside Barden's house. The cattlemen and the homesteaders, who are now aware that they were tricked into fighting each other, reconcile their differences and head inside to share a jug of liquor that Barden has been "saving for a special occasion". Jim Garry and John Lufton both acknowledge that they have been "stubborn" and Amy announces that "That's going to make two stubborn men in the family." She walks indoors between her father and her future husband and the camera pulls back into a long shot of Barden's house, an inviting light shining from its doors and window [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 3.8]. The solution

offered by the ending of the film is to transform the old man's home into a more positive image of domesticity. It becomes the place where the community comes together, and where Jim is accepted into the Lufton family. Spatial restriction is converted into closeness as the characters happily pile into the house, the narrative resolving in a satisfying image of convergence. However, the earlier associations of the old man and the place cannot be completely effaced. The melancholy connotations of isolation, loss and monotony were too forcefully established earlier in the movie for us to forget them entirely. Jim's own role in his incorporation into the community is portrayed as a passive one – he simply stands by and lets it happen. There is a faint echo here of the ingrained habits and fears that kept Barden from leaving the area. Amy also explicitly compares Jim to an older man (her father), in such a way as suggests a quality of stasis or self-imposed confinement (their shared stubbornness) similar to that which has been associated with Barden. When we leave the old man's house, it is in a state of cheerful sociability, but we might also remember that he will continue to live there alone. And even in the cosy final image, it is still possible to see that the windows in the house are broken from the siege.

*Yellow Sky* ends with the creation of another familial group, but puts this group in an opposite relationship with the setting. The siege of the old man's house ends when the most threatening members of Stretch's gang, Dude and Lengthy (John Russell), go off after the gold and each other. The remaining men are persuaded to surrender and join Stretch, Grandpa and Mike in the house. Stretch then goes out and faces Dude and Lengthy, and the conflict in

the ghost town comes to an end. The movie, however, continues for two more scenes. In the first of these, Stretch and the two surviving members of his gang, Walrus and Half-Pint (Henry Morgan), ride into the town that we saw at the start of the film and return the money they stole from the bank. This is presented as a comic inversion of a bank robbery, with Stretch handing back the money at gunpoint. On his way out, he gives a woman four dollars in exchange for her hat, which is decorated with flowers and ribbons. This is the only time in the movie when we see money actually being used to buy something. In the final scene, Stretch and his men join Mike and Grandpa in a lush and verdant area outside the town. Stretch gives Mike the hat, and they all ride away together.

This ending deals with the negative associations attached to the settled world of the old man by taking the characters out of the place where these associations were formed. We do not see them depart from the ghost town, the movie simply shifts location after we have established that Stretch has survived the confrontation with Lengthy and Dude. Like the night-time Lordsburg in *Stagecoach*, the town of Yellow Sky cannot be redeemed, it can only be escaped<sup>23</sup>. Part of the melancholy in this ending comes from its tacit acknowledgement that the only way to achieve a positive conclusion within the terms of the world that the movie portrays is to accept failure and start again. Very little can be continued or retained – Stretch's previous life with his gang has already been discredited and Grandpa's ambitions for the regeneration of the ghost town cannot be fulfilled in a place so lacking in promise for the future. Returning the money to the bank is a gesture of



rejection of the past, a declaration of the abandonment of a negative way of life.

But, like in *Blood on the Moon*, traces of old habits and tendencies can still be detected. We see Half-Pint in Dude's old clothes, rolling the dead man's dice and registering his disappointment at the traditionally unlucky score of snake eyes. The reverse bank robbery also brings some ambiguity to our understanding of the gang's reform. They may be making amends, but it is as if they know no other way of conducting themselves other than as bandits (this is emphasised by the comic awkwardness with which Stretch buys the woman's hat). And despite the new freedom implied in the final scene, some of the sense of immobility associated with the old man remains. Although Grandpa is on horseback in the final scene, he is dozing in the saddle when the men come back from town [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 3.9]. All of these details are treated comically, but this itself is a source of mild unease, in its departure from the more sombre tone of most of the rest of the film. By making them into jokes, these elements are recast as benign or harmless, but their persistence points to the difficulty of leaving the old, melancholy world completely behind.

Man of the West – the World of the Evil Old Man

This implication in the ending of *Yellow Sky* is taken up as a major theme in *Man of the West*. In it, Link Jones (Gary Cooper), a reformed outlaw who has become a respectable family man, is forced back into the malevolent world of his former life with a bandit gang led by Dock Tobin (Lee J. Cobb). Tobin is presented to us as an evil version of the archetypal Western old man. He is grizzled and prone to holding forth in the familiar manner of this stock figure, but these qualities are amplified so that what we would usually understand as roughness and eccentricity edges into wildness and psychosis. The film draws on the same connection that we see in *Blood on the Moon* and *Yellow Sky* between the old man and the setting – Tobin is the exemplary figure of the world in which most of the film takes place. By making this connection when the old man is a villain, the movie is able to represent the West in a particularly bleak fashion.

Although Link is the film's hero, Dock is offered to us as its most authentic Westerner. Kites suggests that, despite the iconic presence of Gary Cooper, the title of the movie might be better applied to Tobin:

When the main title of the film appears, the scope frame balances it against Cooper astride his horse like a statue. But this is one of Mann's deceptions: the film itself leaves little doubt over who is the man of the West.<sup>24</sup>

Tobin's claim to this title is supported in a number of ways. He is portrayed as a figure of considerable authority, who dominates the spaces that we see him in. He is the dictatorial patriarch of his gang, which has a familiar generic

character – Pye likens it to “other monstrous male families in the postwar Western”<sup>25</sup>. We see him ordering his men around like children in the dilapidated cabin (another distinctly *old* place) that serves as their hideout. Tobin is the centre of this dark world – this is indicated by his introduction in the movie, when he steps out of the shadows deep inside the hideout – and it extends out into the wider environment of the West. En route to a planned bank robbery in the town of Lasso, Tobin presides over the extended, nasty and much-discussed<sup>26</sup> fight between Link and Coaley (Jack Lord). The focus is on the two men, but Dock asserts his authority by acting as a combination of referee and ringmaster, standing over them as they fight [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 3.10], showing his approval in a series of reaction shots. Link beats Coaley, and strips off his clothes as retribution for making Billie Ellis (Julie London) undress for the leering entertainment of the gang earlier. But Tobin is the final arbiter of this conflict – when the humiliated Coaley goes after Link with a gun, the old man shoots him dead.

The final indication of the dominance and authority with which Dock occupies the spaces of the West comes in the climactic face-off with Link. Link returns from Lasso, having killed the rest of the gang, and finds Billie lying in the back of Dock’s wagon, the clear implication being that the old man has raped her. The next few shots are tightly framed – we are brought in close in order to register the intensity of Billie’s pain and fear, and Link’s reactions of sorrow and anger. We hear Tobin’s echoing voice over a close-up of Link, and as he follows the sound the space of the scene opens up again. We see, in long shot, Dock standing high up on a ledge overlooking the surrounding desert,

bellowing down at Link below [see *Illustrations, Fig. 3.11*]. He is a tiny, indistinct figure, but the height at which he is standing, the sky behind him and the way his voice carries and resonates give him a towering presence. Wood comments on the “grandiosity”<sup>27</sup> of this staging and Kitses argues that it presents Tobin as “a figure of tragic force”<sup>28</sup> by emphasising both his eminence and his isolation (qualities, we should note, that are frequently associated with the heroes of Westerns). In distant silhouette, Tobin almost seems like part of the landscape, a seamless extension of the rock he is standing on. The intimate human world of Billie and Link is placed within the vastness and cruelty of the surrounding environment, with which Dock is aligned. Thus, we return again to the melancholy understanding of the world as a violent place, which I have identified both in Mann’s Westerns and in other movies from the genre<sup>29</sup>. Dock’s individual violence is projected on a larger scale, becoming an expansive and pervasive force that affects everything around it. The violence impinges on the lives of the other characters – Billie is raped, and Link is compelled to kill. Tobin even seems to dictate the violent terms of his own death – he comes down from the mountain like a deranged Moses [see *Illustrations, Fig. 3.12*], repeatedly commanding Link to shoot him and firing wildly until Link finally guns him down. When he dies, he still retains a sense of wild, unconstrained force as he rolls down the slope, his limbs flailing and sprawling.

It is difficult to write about Dock Tobin without resorting to descriptions that seem pompous or florid. This is because the character is presented to us in such an emphatic and exaggerated fashion, particularly through Cobb’s

performance. Cobb employs an array of declamatory gestures in his portrayal of Dock – among others, shouting, growling, squinting, cocking his head and waving his arms. A number of critics suggest that Cobb's acting style, which can seem excessive in other contexts, finds an unusually appropriate vehicle in the grotesque and imposing old man. Kitses remarks that "Cobb's liking for the grandiose for once served a director well,"<sup>30</sup> and Wood offers this assessment:

I have frequently found Lee J. Cobb's performances a liability, his desire to show the audience how much he is acting, what hard work he is doing, often going right "over the top". This is certainly true of *Man of the West*, but here it works, Mann using the persona brilliantly: not just Cobb, but *Dock*, is "giving a performance" all the time, desperately trying to convince himself (as well as his ragtag gang) that he is not an anachronism, that he still "has it in him".<sup>31</sup>

Wood identifies an element of desperation in Tobin's aggressive presence, the impulse to demonstrate that his status has not diminished with age and changing times. In this respect he is a melancholy figure. His need to remain a dominant force is set alongside his awareness that things are not as they once were – he complains that his latter-day henchmen lack "guts", and indulges in nostalgic recollections of his murderous past with Link.

### The Evil Old Man and the Western Hero

The force of Dock's self-assertion can also be connected back to the parallels between the old man and the Western hero. Dock is committed to maintaining a particular image of himself at all costs. In this respect, he fits Warshow's description of the iconic Westerner, who fights "to state what he is"

and “must live in a world which permits that statement.”<sup>32</sup> From this perspective, we might think of him as a further extension of the inflection of the Western hero towards the monstrous, which I examined in my earlier discussion of violence<sup>33</sup>. He is certainly the most starkly defined and mythic character in the movie, and a much more consistent figure than the conflicted Link. Pye refers to the “conflicting personae”<sup>34</sup> that are quickly established for Link – the iconic hero, the nervous rural “hick”, who is clearly “out of place”<sup>35</sup> in the town at the start of the film and “the psychotic outlaw”<sup>36</sup> that he once was, and that his conflict with the Tobin gang threatens to turn him back into. Link is a sympathetic and psychologically complex character, but he lacks the traditional integrity of the Western hero. Instead, we find this quality in Dock, “intact”, as Kitses asserts, “to the end”<sup>37</sup>.

This integrity, expressed through the vicious and repulsive Tobin, ceases to be a positive characteristic. The combined associations of villainy and old age recontextualise it as a kind of vicious stubbornness. But still, we can see the connection with the heroic type. Pye argues that *Man of the West* uses this connection to undermine the figure of the Western hero by suggesting that “what is inherent in that serene and solitary figure in the credits is this crazed old man”<sup>38</sup>. He links this to “the motif of the double”<sup>39</sup> in Mann’s Westerns, but this relationship can also be seen elsewhere in the genre. I have already argued that the old man can act as a melancholy double to the Western hero, and *Man of the West* exploits these and other generic resonances. One such resonance can be seen in the film’s use of names, which Wood calls “allegorical”<sup>40</sup>. Wood points out that the name Link is

appropriate for a character that stands between different worlds and thus serves as a “link” between them<sup>41</sup>. He then explores the horticultural and psychoanalytical connotations of “Dock”. Wood reminds us that it is both the name of a coarse and persistent weed (which he links to Dock’s age and stubbornness) and a verb meaning to shorten or cut off (which he links to Dock’s role as the “castrating father”)<sup>42</sup>. He also claims that “Critics really have no excuse for misspelling *Dock* Tobin: he spells out his name for Billie, and “Doc” has no resonance.”<sup>43</sup> I would argue, however, that regardless of spelling, the most obvious association evoked by the name in a *Western* context is that of Doc Holliday, Wyatt Earp’s counterpart in the number of films concerned with the gunfight at the O.K. Corral in Tombstone. Doc Holliday, as Kitses reflects, looking back at *My Darling Clementine*,<sup>44</sup> is another dark double of the Western hero. He is usually portrayed as a more morally ambiguous figure – a drinker, a gambler and a cynic – than the upright Earp, but he is also Earp’s ally and friend. There is some of this same combination of closeness and distance in the relationship between Link Jones and Dock Tobin. Although Tobin represents a world that Link has rejected, the old man was once his mentor and father figure. Doc Holliday’s other main distinguishing feature is his tuberculosis. This gives him a degree of physical infirmity which we could compare to an old man.

Dock’s age has a number of implications if we consider him as Link’s double. One of the things it does is draw attention to Link’s own increasing age (and that of Gary Cooper). Although the film still asserts the difference between the grey-bearded Tobin and the slightly lined Link (a clear visual distinction

had to be established, since Cooper was actually ten years older than Cobb) we can still see that Link is no longer a young man. This contributes to our sense of him as settled – in his reformed life, he seems to have attained some of the comfort and stability associated with middle age. This becomes a source of melancholy in the movie, since it circumscribes Link's status as a hero. One of the places where this is most evident is in the impossibility of Link and Billie forming a couple. Billie comes to love Link, but knows that he has a wife and children waiting for him at home in the settlement of Good Hope, somewhere outside the world of the movie. Indeed, it is the settled side of Link that Billie is drawn to – the same side that prevents the possibility of a relationship between them. She falls in love with him because he is courteous, considerate and gentle to her, in contrast to the men she encounters in her work as a singer, who she says "all feel like they have the right to put their hands on me." Link does put his hands on Billie, but in a very different way – his characteristic gesture towards her is a comforting pat on the hands or head [see *Illustrations, Fig. 3.13*]. The sense of their difference in age is important here – Link's reassurances are almost fatherly. It is suggested that Link does, at least to some extent, return Billie's affection, but that he would never act on it. Both characters recognise the futility of this situation – Billie reflects on it at some length, and Link registers his own more quiet sadness at it. At the end of the movie, Billie takes a lonely comfort in her love for Link as they ride away, soon to resume their respective and separate lives. This would be a melancholy sentiment at the best of times, but its consolation seems all the more fragile and fleeting in the light of all the pain and abuse that we have seen her suffer. Link's advancing age makes



obvious the time and commitment he has invested in his settled life and his unwillingness or inability (much like the old men in *Blood on the Moon* and *Yellow Sky*) to give that up. Thus, he cannot play the romantic part of the hero's role.

Another way in which Link's age brings a melancholy element to our perception of him as a hero concerns the violence he has to use to defeat the Tobin gang. In another Western, as we have seen<sup>45</sup>, the peaceful hero's resumption of violence might be portrayed as a satisfying return to meaningful action. In the context of Link's reformed and settled middle age, however, it is experienced at least in part as a betrayal of the values he has embraced, and a loss of the gains that he has made in his life. This is expressed in the contrast between Link's manners and his violent actions. For most of the movie, he is polite and softly-spoken. Cooper's thoughtful and deliberate way of speaking seems almost prim and fastidious at times, as if Link feels compelled to insist with great care that he is no longer an outlaw. This is juxtaposed with his lapses into brutal violence, which are portrayed as both necessary and gratuitous. This is most clearly demonstrated in his beating and stripping of Coaley, which is evidently motivated by Coaley's treatment of Billie, but which exceeds this motivation through its protracted and savage nature. Our view of Link's heroic actions is complicated by their relationship to the life he has built for himself. His victories against his old gang are also defeats for this life. In the violent world Link returns to, his life in Good Hope seems almost as much of a sad and hopeful dream as Billie's love for him.

The world of violence is also linked, through the figure of Dock Tobin, to old age. This is another important part of Dock's significance as Link's double. In Dock, we can see the extension of characteristics associated with Link, most obviously the tendency towards violence. This relationship is emphasised by our understanding of Dock as old and Link as ageing. In the signs of increasing age on Link's face, which would have been especially clear to a contemporary audience, many of whom would remember Cooper as a much younger star, we can see an old man in the making. In his return to violence, Link is faced with the prospect of ageing into a man like Dock, a possibility that does not seem remote enough to be entirely comfortable. Part of the threat of this comes from the disturbing hints of a more ordinary and domestic old man that exist alongside Tobin's grotesqueness and brutality. His gang, for all its corruption and perversion, is still recognisable as a family. Claude (John Dehner) expresses a touching filial loyalty – "I watch out for that old man. I love him, and I watch out for him" – and Coaley seems keen to impress his "Uncle Dock". At the hideout, Dock puts a striped green scarf on over his bandit's neckerchief, and sits down in his rocking chair by the fire. These cosy, grandfatherly touches coexist with cruelty and violence as if there was no contradiction between them. This is emphasised during Billie's forced strip. Coaley makes her undress by holding a knife to Link's throat. Towards the end of the strip, we see a shot with Coaley and Link in the foreground on the left side of the CinemaScope frame and Dock in the background on the right [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 3.14]. Link is still in Coaley's grip and there is a thin trickle of blood running down his throat where the knife has broken the skin. Dock is dozing in his chair. The juxtaposition of these images in the

same shot brings a sense of routine and banality to the violence. The most terrifying aspect of *Man of the West* is its portrayal of violence as little more than a habit, something that can be lapsed into easily and without much thought. This is embodied in the figure of Dock Tobin, who is both a monster and an old curmudgeon, set in his ways.

Like the old men in *Blood on the Moon* and *Yellow Sky*, Tobin's age is used to express a sense of the limited possibilities for change or progress in the place with which he is associated. If Dock is indeed the Man of the West, then the West is a melancholy place. It is a place where the ambitions and impulses of the frontier still exist, but are corrupted and frustrated. Dock conceives of his planned bank robbery in pioneer terms – he likens the convoy of wagons that he leads to Lassoo to “a family of old settlers moving on”. He believes Lassoo to be a centre for profitable frontier industries, with a stage bank (presumably a combined banking and express service, like Wells Fargo) full of money from the surrounding mining operations. When we finally see Lassoo, however, it is a ghost town, the wealth Tobin seeks having long since departed from the area. Link explicitly compares Dock to Lassoo in their final confrontation – “Lassoo's a ghost town. And that's what you are, Dock – a ghost.” As in *Yellow Sky*, the old man and the ghost town are connected by a sense of stagnation, of remaining unchanged beyond repair or redemption. The ghost town is the dead end to the journey we see in the film. It is a place with no future – Kites' description of Dock as “frozen in time”<sup>46</sup> fits Lassoo as well. But Dock's villainy takes him beyond the despair and resignation of the ghost town – he is not simply a passive figure of decay, he is also an active force of

destruction. The rape of Billie shows that he will continue to inflict harm regardless of whether or not there are banks to rob. Dock Tobin's West may no longer support growth or development, but it still supports violence. Through the figure of the villainous old man, *Man of the West* combines the static world of the old-timer with the violent one suggested by many Westerns. It offers us the worst parts of what we might call the "Old West" and the "Wild West". The result of this combination is bleak, but also recognisable and familiar. It is these latter qualities that make it melancholy – it is a sad version of a generic world that we know.

#### *Ride the High Country* – Old Men, Heroism and Authenticity

Having already looked a little at the implications of Link's age in *Man of the West*, I will conclude the chapter by returning to the ageing Western hero. In *Ride the High Country* the two heroes, Steve Judd (Joel McCrea) and Gil Westrum (Randolph Scott), are old men. Although the stars of the two movies were broadly in the same age group at the times of their respective releases (Cooper was 57, McCrea was 56 and Scott was 64), their characters' ages are framed differently. In *Man of the West*, we understand Link to be middle-aged because we have Dock to compare him to. There is no such figure in *Ride the High Country* to qualify our sense of the heroes' age, so they are offered to us more straightforwardly as old men.

There is, however, an important distinction to be made between these heroes and the other old men I have looked at. The old men that I have spent most

of this chapter discussing are played by character actors; Gil Westrum and Steve Judd are played by stars. This makes us understand their age differently. Because they usually play supporting characters, character actors rely on their distinctiveness of appearance or manner to establish their significance quickly and simply. The economy with which this is done makes us tend to regard their attributes as inherent and fixed – the *type* they embody is sufficiently recognisable that we would not think to contemplate where they came from or how they got that way. The old men I have considered up to this point embody old age in a clear and condensed fashion – we do not really think of them as having ever been young. *Yellow Sky* acknowledges this with a self-conscious joke. Remembering when he first came to the town of Yellow Sky, Grandpa says, “I was a young fellow myself – not a day over sixty!” Although stars can also be said to embody types and to rely on distinctive qualities that establish their role quickly, they are also the subject of more sustained focus and attention in their films. Thus, their types become somewhat more elaborated. In addition, stars generally come to prominence when they are still relatively young. This means that older stars convey a clearer sense of ageing as a process. We have seen them age over the course of their careers and we can connect them back to their younger selves.

It is this quality in the stars of *Ride the High Country* that has produced the more or less standard interpretation of the film as melancholy. As Paul Seydor summarises:

The presence of McCrea and Scott, by this time western-film stars in the autumn of their careers, could not help but confer an extra increment of pathos onto the roles they played.<sup>47</sup>

In this interpretation, the movie is made more poignant by our memory of its stars as younger men. This promotes a melancholy awareness of time. We can see the tangible effects of its passing on stars who were once seen in the full physical assurance of youth. Cavell argues that the film basks in the reflected glory of these resonances, using them as an easy shortcut to appeal to the emotions of its audience:

In *Ride the High Country*, the pathos of the ageing cowboys (Randolph Scott and Joel McCrea) depends on their being enacted by ageing men whom we can remember as young cowboys. This is obvious, but the film is overrated, I believe, because it taps this particular source of feeling.<sup>48</sup>

This might be the case if the stars' careers were evoked solely as a source of pathos, but they are not. Both Seydor and Cavell stress Scott and McCrea's specific status as Western stars, whose personae are bound up in their work in the genre. This gives a wider significance to their casting than a simple invitation to indulge in nostalgia or mourn their lost youth.

The casting of the two stars forms a part of the film's engagement with the conventions and traditions of the Western genre. The familiarity of McCrea and Scott from a large number of Westerns (they made nearly 100 between them) is one of the key aspects that shape our perspective on the world of the movie. Their presence is the feature that anchors it most firmly within the genre – they serve as a kind of guarantee of Western authenticity. Part of this comes from their age. The film draws on some of the same associations I

have already noted in relation to old men, in particular the trope of the old man as the exemplary figure of the Western setting. But this trope is also inverted by the movie. Whilst Steve and Gil are exemplary Westerners, their connection to the world they inhabit has been severed. Times have changed, and the familiar generic quality that the old men embody appears out of step with their surroundings. This melancholy sense of detachment is suggested in the opening titles, which show us some expansive views of the Western landscape from which no human figures emerge. The solitary rider that we might conventionally expect to appear at the start of the movie does not do so.

We first see both the heroes in situations that seem to undermine their authenticity. Steve rides into the town of Hornitos where the first part of the movie is set, onto a street flanked with cheering crowds. Confused, and perhaps remembering the adulation he received in his career as a lawman, he tips his hat to the onlookers, as if they were there to greet him. It is quickly revealed, however, that the street has been temporarily converted into a racetrack, which is what the crowds are there for, and Steve is hustled to one side by an impatient policeman. Gil is introduced running a crooked carnival shooting gallery, calling himself “The Oregon Kid” and wearing a wig and false goatee that make him look like a cheap imitation of Buffalo Bill Cody [see *Illustrations, Fig. 3.15*]. As Seydor puts it:

The theme is diminishment, disillusion, and compromise. Gil's tacky new identity serves as its own commentary, while Steve, for all his quiet dignity, appears just a little comical and quaint.<sup>49</sup>

Despite this, however, we retain a strong sense of their authenticity and value. This is partly because their surroundings seem so alien. As well as the carnival in Hornitos, we see a camel racing against horses in the cleared street, a Chinese restaurant and a very early motorcar. Against this backdrop, McCrea and Scott seem reassuringly familiar, their long accumulation of Western associations giving them a grounding that the town's incoherent blend of the new and the exotic cannot provide. Because of the pre-existing status they bring with them as iconic Western stars, we are loath to accept the initial judgements implied by their characters' introductions. A place in which they are merely old men is a place that has simply failed to recognise them for what we know them to be from our experience of other movies. With the weight of both genre and stardom behind them, we need very little urging into the belief that the old men are right and that it is the world around them that is wrong.

### Finding a Place where Old Men can be Heroes

What the film needs to do, then, is create a different space in which its stars can realise their heroic potential. Where this happens is out in the wilderness, the "High Country" referred to in the title. The wilderness takes on a similar role, albeit on a much smaller scale, to the one it plays in *Stagecoach*: a freer, more open place where significant action is possible. Steve takes a job as bank guard, collecting and transporting gold for the Hornitos National Bank, and hires Gil and his young friend Heck Longtree (Ron Starr) to help him. Gil and Heck initially plan to steal the gold that they collect, but even this



suggests the greater sense of possibilities that this environment offers – possibilities for satisfying expressions of heroism, villainy and redemption. The old men regain their familiar iconic stature out on the trail coming to and from the mining settlement of Coarse Gold. Although we still see signs of their age – Gil gets sore in the saddle, Steve gains great relief from washing his feet in a stream – these seem more like quirky details of characterisation, rather than signs of infirmity and decrepitude. Steve and Gil are repeatedly shown on horseback in low-angled shots that place them imposingly against the cloudless blue sky [see *Illustrations, Figs. 3.16 and 3.17*]. Whilst these images powerfully affirm the grandeur that the characters have recovered, they also hint at the fragility of this affirmation. The old men are framed in empty space, almost abstracted, as if their stature can only be maintained by removing them from any more detailed context.

This is demonstrated when they arrive in Coarse Gold and are faced once again with the world of commerce and people, albeit in a rougher and dirtier form than in Hornitos. In the gold camp, Steve and Gil become more marginal figures again, receding from the narrative. The focus shifts for a while to Elsa Knudsen (Mariette Hartley), who comes to the camp to marry Billy Hammond (James Drury). Their nightmarish wedding is held in Kate's Place, a noisy, garishly decorated saloon and brothel, and it soon becomes apparent that Billy intends to let his four brothers rape his new bride. She is rescued from this grim situation by Steve and Heck, but the process of getting her out of the camp is longer and more convoluted, requiring Gil to rig a miners' court in her favour. Her rescue consists of a series of small, unspectacular confrontations

– no particular action merits a more emphatic treatment. Such action only starts to seem possible again when the characters are back on the trail.

Much of the melancholy attached to Steve and Gil comes from this sense of the narrow specificity of the conditions in which they can function as heroes. The satisfaction of their transformation is tempered with our awareness of its precarious nature, creating a bittersweet mixture of emotions characteristic of melancholy. This can be related back to the film's combining of the figures of hero and old man, and their respective associations. The stature of the hero is combined with the old man's sense of restricted possibilities. The juxtaposition of these qualities has an intensifying effect – the expectations that the heroes bring with them make us feel their limitations more profoundly, but these limitations make the actions they do perform all the more significant.

All of this culminates in the final confrontation, where Gil and Steve face Billy Hammond and his two remaining brothers at the Knudsen homestead. This is a moment of climactic heroic action, framed in the melancholy terms of the old man. The location is a particularly important aspect of this. On the one hand, the Knudsen farm is a derelict place of failed settlement – when the main characters return to it, its one remaining inhabitant, Elsa's father Joshua Knudsen (R.G. Armstrong), has been killed by the Hammonds. This would make it seem like the kind of pessimistic and restrictive location we have seen associated with old men in other Westerns. On the other hand, its emptiness also connects it to the wilderness spaces in the film, in which we have seen the old men restored to heroic stature. The farm takes on additional

associations of freedom with the death of Knudsen, a dour, fanatically religious man whose oppressive strictness had caused Elsa to run away. Seydor explains the significance of the homestead as a setting for action in terms of the removal of social standards and controls:

In the absence of external authority of *any* kind, the farm becomes the one and only place in the film where that old-time activity the two westerners are always talking about is able justifiably to be shifted from the plane of nostalgic reverie to that of vital necessity.<sup>50</sup>

The farm is not completely removed from the world of people, however. Although it is no longer inhabited, its buildings still stand and have not yet had the time to decay. The remaining signs of habitation give its empty space a more contained and coherent shape than that of the expansive wilderness. The farm strikes a balance between freedom and restriction – it is still a separate and empty space where meaningful action is possible, but it is more structured than the wilderness, giving this action a greater sense of focus and purpose. When Gil and Steve face the Hammonds, we see a high-angled shot of the farmyard, bounded on all sides by buildings, farm equipment and trees [see *Illustrations, Fig. 3.18*]. The old men enter from the left, the Hammonds from the right. The space is offered to us as a stage or arena, where heroic roles can be properly performed.

This dimension of performance is an important aspect of how the confrontation is portrayed. The movie stresses that the final face-off with the Hammonds is an artificial situation. It does not arise naturally; rather, it has to be contrived. Steve, Gil, Heck and Elsa are pinned down in a ditch on one side of the farmyard. The Hammonds occupy the barn and the house on the

other side. Steve is injured but still active. Heck has been shot in the leg and will play no further part in the conflict. The old men goad the Hammonds out into the open with insults and accusations of cowardice. By doing this, they are able to dictate the terms of the confrontation, shifting them away from tactical considerations and towards issues of appearance and reputation. The fight is recast in terms of honour, as a display of fair and open violence. The significant point is less that the Steve and Gil persuade the brothers to give up their advantages of position and cover – the old men are still outnumbered – than that they are able to manufacture a situation in which they can conduct themselves as heroes. As Seydor points out, this necessitates transforming the Hammonds into “worthy foes”<sup>51</sup> by getting them to accept the terms of the face-off. Elder Hammond (John Anderson) initially plans to stay in the house and shoot the old men when they emerge from the ditch, but Billy makes him come outside, saying, “Ain’t you got no sense of family honour?”

For Steve and Gil, the gunfight is a chance to recreate a more satisfyingly expressive style of action, the kind that they were involved in as younger men. Their decision to face the Hammonds out in the open is portrayed as an act of nostalgic bravado. The dialogue leading up to it emphasises the vulnerability of their position, drawing attention to Steve’s gunshot wound and the fact that, although they have pistols, their only rifle is a useless distance away with Steve’s horse. In a perverse way, this vulnerability becomes a positive quality – it guarantees the significance of the old men’s actions by emphasising the level of audacity and risk involved. This can be connected to Tompkins’ observation that “In Westerns, facing death and doing something with your life

become one and the same thing.”<sup>52</sup> The effect of the sense of purpose that the heroes gain can be seen in the delight with which they agree their course of action. Steve smiles at Gil and says, “Let’s meet ‘em head-on – halfway, just like always.” Gil smiles back and responds, “My sentiments exactly.”

In the unique conditions of the face-off, then, Gil and Steve are able to fulfil the aim that Warshow ascribes to the Westerner – the assertion of “personal value”<sup>53</sup>. Because they are old men, this is given a particular inflection. What they are asserting is not simply their value but the endurance of their value, the fact that they are *still* heroes. The gunfight displays both their stature and their age, their power and their vulnerability. We see them approaching the Hammonds in another imposing low-angled shot [see *Illustrations, Fig. 3.19*], the force of their presence accentuated by their steady forward motion. They initially seem almost invincible – Gil takes a bullet to the shoulder and barely breaks his stride – but this illusion is broken when Steve is hit and falls to the ground. The old men kill the Hammonds, but we immediately see the physical cost of this action. When Gil crouches down over Steve, the camera is closer to them than it was during the gunfight – the lines, stubble and dirt on their faces is more apparent. We can also hear that both men are short of breath.

This reassertion of the physical signs of their age puts their heroic victory in a melancholy context by emphasising their limitations alongside their capabilities. But it is still a victory. Steve dies, but even this seems like a culmination of his attempts to assert his own seriousness throughout the movie. In other parts of the film, as Kitses suggests, “There is something very

akin to desperation in the character's severity,"<sup>54</sup> but Steve's death provides a more appropriate context for the expression of the somewhat earnest side of McCrea's persona. The film's portrayal of its heroes is characterised by the combination of affirmation and pathos – the sad satisfactions of melancholy. This combination is exemplified by Steve's death, which is portrayed as both a tragic loss and a meaningful gesture. In the final shot of the movie, we see Steve in the foreground on the right of the frame. When he dies, he falls almost completely out of the shot, leaving only the background behind him [see *Illustrations, Fig. 3.20*]. As Seydor describes,

With no movement from the camera, no cutting, no alteration of focus or setup, the shot is transformed from a close-up to a long shot, the man no longer blocking out the sky and the mountains far in the distance.<sup>55</sup>

We are left with a sense of the space that Steve's passing creates. This emphasises both the grandeur of his character and the significance of his loss. Thus, the movie ends with a final expression of melancholy ambiguity.

Both *Ride the High Country* and *Man of the West* can be thought of as retrospective Westerns – movies that self-consciously look back on their generic tradition. The figure of the old man as a melancholy double to the Western hero is a key part of the perspective on the genre offered by both films. In *Man of the West*, the hero could be said to be usurped by his double. Our expectations of the heroic figure that seems to be promised at the start of the movie are frustrated by the nature of the world it presents to us, a world more accurately embodied by Dock Tobin. Through its association with the old man, the familiar generic environment of the West becomes a place where

the only possibilities that remain are those of violence. *Ride the High Country* tries to reconstruct the hero out of his melancholy double by bringing out the heroic features in its old men. If the world they inhabit initially seems as inimical to heroism as that of *Man of the West*, more sympathetic spaces also exist. As Western stars, the heroes bring a greater sense of possibility to the figure of the old man, but as old men, this can only be expressed in a fragmentary and restricted fashion.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Edward Buscombe, 'Old-timer', in Buscombe (ed.), *The BFI Companion to the Western*, p. 197.

<sup>2</sup> Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, p. 484.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land*, p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers*, originally published 1823, version cited (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988) p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, *Virgin Land*, p. 65.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>7</sup> David Lusted, *The Western* (Harlow: Pearson / Longman, 2003), p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> Buscombe, 'Old-timer', p. 197.

<sup>9</sup> Stanfield, *Horse Opera*, pp. 119-120.

<sup>10</sup> See Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, p. 89.

<sup>11</sup> The most famous example is proto-Bluegrass singer and banjo player Grandpa Jones, who adopted the nickname while still in his twenties, hiding his youth behind a bushy grey false moustache. See Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, p. 65n and p. 66.

<sup>12</sup> See Chapter 1, p. 145.

<sup>13</sup> See Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 55. I should perhaps point out that Peterson is using "geezer" in the American sense of the word, as a slightly derogatory term for an old man.

<sup>17</sup> Although ghost towns appear in a number of different genres, they are most prevalent in Westerns. A keyword search for "Ghost Town" on the Internet Movie Database illustrates this – the genre in which the largest number of results are grouped is "Western". See 'Best "Ghost Town" Titles', *The Internet Movie Database*, <http://uk.imdb.com/keyword/ghost-town/>, accessed September 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Buscombe, 'Ghost town', in Buscombe (ed.), *The BFI Companion to the Western*, p. 129.

- 
- <sup>19</sup> Simmon, *The Invention of the Western Film*, p. 270.
- <sup>20</sup> See Chapter 1, pp. 146-147.
- <sup>21</sup> Newman, *Wild West Movies*, p. 204.
- <sup>22</sup> Anne Janowitz, *England's Ruins: Poetic Purpose and the National Landscape* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 4.
- <sup>23</sup> See Chapter 2, p. 188.
- <sup>24</sup> Kitses, *Horizons West*, p. 58.
- <sup>25</sup> Pye, 'The Collapse of Fantasy: Masculinity in the Westerns of Anthony Mann', p. 170.
- <sup>26</sup> See Kitses, *Horizons West*, p. 42, Wood, 'Man(n) of the West(ern)', pp. 32-33 and Fairlamb, '"One in a Thousand": Western Stars, Heroes and their Guns', p. 24.
- <sup>27</sup> Wood, 'Man(n) of the West(ern)', p. 33.
- <sup>28</sup> Kitses, *Horizons West*, p. 57.
- <sup>29</sup> See Chapter 1, pp. 97-134.
- <sup>30</sup> Kitses, *Horizons West*, p. 57.
- <sup>31</sup> Wood, 'Man(n) of the West(ern)', p. 33.
- <sup>32</sup> Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 111.
- <sup>33</sup> See Chapter 1, pp. 134-140.
- <sup>34</sup> Pye, 'The Collapse of Fantasy: Masculinity in the Westerns of Anthony Mann', p. 170.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 167.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 172.
- <sup>37</sup> Kitses, *Horizons West*, p. 57.
- <sup>38</sup> Pye, 'The Collapse of Fantasy: Masculinity in the Westerns of Anthony Mann', p. 172.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 170.
- <sup>40</sup> Wood, 'Man(n) of the West(ern)', p. 31.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 31.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 31-32.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 31.
- <sup>44</sup> Kitses, 'Introduction: Post-modernism and The Western', pp. 29-30.
- <sup>45</sup> See Chapter 1, pp. 87-92 and pp. 128-129.
- <sup>46</sup> Kitses, *Horizons West*, p. 57.
- <sup>47</sup> Paul Seydor, *Peckinpah: The Western Films* (Urbana / Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), p. 27.
- <sup>48</sup> Cavell, *The World Viewed*, p. 75.
- <sup>49</sup> Seydor, *Peckinpah: The Western Films*, p. 33.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 39.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 40.
- <sup>52</sup> Tompkins, *West of Everything*, p. 31.
- <sup>53</sup> Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', p. 113.
- <sup>54</sup> Kitses, *Horizons West*, p. 155.
- <sup>55</sup> Seydor, *Peckinpah: The Western Films*, p. 40.



## Chapter 4: Music

For most of this thesis I have consciously ranged across my chosen period. This is because my focus is on genre, and I have wanted to suggest that Westerns which might not have much in terms of historical background in common can still share important generic tropes. For my final chapter, however, I want to concentrate on a specific moment in the history of Hollywood Westerns. In the early 1950s, a trend emerged that brought to prominence some of the ways in which Westerns can be seen as melancholy. This trend was the title or theme song.

Western theme songs, which proliferated after the success of *High Noon* and its titular ballad in 1952, were usually heard over their film's opening credits. They therefore played a part in introducing the movie and establishing its genre, narrative and tone. These songs helped to identify a film as a Western, and suggest what sorts of viewing (and listening) experience that this might entail. The implicit definition of the Western genre offered by many title songs involves a significant element of melancholy. Thus, many of the songs themselves can be seen as melancholy interpretations of the genre.

### Westerns and Popular Music

These interpretations are produced by the interaction of different sets of narrative and expressive conventions: those of Western movies and those of popular music. As we shall see, the combination of these two sensibilities is often strikingly melancholy. Of course, it is important to note that the two halves of this hybrid were

not entirely separate to begin with. The popularity and prominence of Western films has certainly influenced trends in popular music (two examples would be the self-conscious adoption of a Western image by 1970s West Coast Country-Rock performers<sup>1</sup> and the incorporation of Western motifs into reggae music from the 1960s through to the 1980s<sup>2</sup>). Conversely, as we have already seen, various forms of popular and folk music, most obviously Country and Western, have contributed to the wider cultural sense of what the American West has been taken to mean, and the characteristic images and tropes that we might expect to find in such a setting.

The conventions of popular music exert an important influence on the ways in which the title songs of Westerns portray their genre, introducing new configurations and points of emphasis. In order to achieve a coherent and complementary relationship between the two sets of conventions, however, the songs often stress areas of overlap. It is through this strategy that a sense emerges of parallel traditions of melancholy in Hollywood Westerns and American popular music.

Historically, popular music has often proved to be an interesting exception to the disavowal of melancholy seen in many strands of American culture. Examining a list of “the forty most popular songs printed in the USA in the 1790s”, Donald Clarke observes that,

The infant United States of America was a frontier in more senses than one. America’s taste in music, drama and literature initially reflected the divisive War of Independence the new nation had gone through, the hardships endured and the homesickness of a people who were nearly all immigrants. Of that early top forty, only five songs were written by composers living in the USA. A difference was apparent between the most successful imports and the rest of an English composer’s output: English songs covered the gamut of styles – humorous, sentimental, salacious and so on – but those most popular in America were the tear-jerkers.<sup>3</sup>

The influence of this initial inclination towards the melancholic seems to have been more persistent in popular music than in the other art forms listed by Clarke. This can be seen in some of the ways in which the history and traditions of American music have been represented and understood. By the 1920s, a perceived tradition of American popular music had been identified and given the name “old-time”. Stanfield argues that this designation emerged out of a desire to promote a sense of heritage in opposition to the modern:

The growing popularity of old-time music therefore must be set against its competition, jazz, which emerged at the same time. In this sense the publication of a number of histories and collections of nineteenth- and turn-of-the-century songs are counterreactions to the urban sounds of jazz that invoked the anxieties of modernity.<sup>4</sup>

However we interpret the causes behind these attempts to define and reconstruct the musical past, we can see that much of the music that was included in this tradition had a distinctly melancholy character. Stanfield describes the various songs collected in American popular and folk songbooks of the 1920s and 1930s in explicitly melancholy terms: “...these songs take on the appearance of a lost world, the door to which opens out upon a bittersweet nostalgic vista.”<sup>5</sup> The very act of assembling these anthologies of songs suggests a sense of loss, the effects of which must be countered through preservation.

The “archaic universe”<sup>6</sup> of old-time music included Western conventions and iconography. In keeping with the tendency that has already been observed, Western songs from this period often favoured the melancholic. Stanfield notes that “For every tale of derring-do out on the range, a dozen are laments for fallen comrades”<sup>7</sup>. As the popularity of this type of song grew and recordings of them moved away from

the deliberate archaism of old-time music and adopted a more contemporary, commercial sound, the melancholy in the music and the lyrics still persisted. Discussing the famous Western vocal group The Sons of the Pioneers, Stanfield remarks that,

The 151 songs that the band recorded for Standard between August 1934 and September 1935 represent probably the most melancholic collection of songs ever grouped together – death's hand lies heavily on the minds and tongues of this young band. It is as if all the sentimental Victorian sorrow ever wrought has here found its last and greatest expression – a *memento mori* shrouded in the most modern of vocal and instrumental arrangements. This is a pristine example of what I mean when I say the cowboy was a mediator between the old and the new.<sup>8</sup>

What Stanfield is describing here is the use of Western tropes (the cowboy image adopted by the group) to market traditional melancholy to a contemporary audience. The Sons of the Pioneers, whose name presents them as the self-conscious bearers of a tradition, were able to integrate “sentimental Victorian sorrow” into a popular 1930s style.

### Time and the Title Song

This sense of the past from the perspective of the present has great melancholy potential. As I have already argued, melancholy has often been characterised in these terms – as an acute sensitivity to the passage of time, and a sense of the continuing presence or influence of that which is past. One of the things revealed by examining the role of theme songs in Westerns is a highly complex representation of time. This is particularly evident in relation to point of view – the temporal perspective from which a film's narrative action is experienced can be strongly affected, and even disrupted, by the use of a particular song.

This is perhaps unsurprising, given the different sets of temporal conventions that come together in these circumstances. Westerns are understood as representing the historical past, but this representation is achieved more through the reproduction of familiar conventions from the genre's own history than through accurate period detail. Like a film from any other genre, a Western will also contain elements that give a particular indication of the time it was made (for example, stars, or particular fashions in costume or makeup which can be detected despite the "period" setting). As Hollywood movies, Westerns will also generally follow the broader conventions for the "realistic" representation of time, particularly continuity editing. The featured use of songs in Westerns brings other temporal conventions into play, notably those of music (rhythm, tempo, meter, etc) and those relating to verbal language (the various tenses available for use in the lyrics). Of course, this is not to suggest that Westerns did not use music and speech before the trend for theme songs emerged, but merely that this trend put these elements into new configurations.

*High Noon*, the Western that did the most to establish the fashion for theme songs, is also, as Stephen McVeigh reminds us<sup>9</sup>, a movie which foregrounds the dimension of time. Its title song, credited in the film as 'High Noon' but known elsewhere as 'The Ballad of High Noon' and 'Do Not Forsake Me, Oh My Darlin'', complicates the representation of time in the film considerably. The song was written by composer Dimitri Tiomkin and lyricist Ned Washington, and performed by Tex Ritter. From when we first hear it over the opening titles, the song establishes itself as an alternative representation of time in the movie. Under the credits we see three of the film's gang of four villains – Jack Colby (Lee Van Cleef), Jim Pierce (Robert Wilke) and Ben Miller (Sheb Wooley, himself a Country and Western singer) – assembling

and riding into the town of Hadleyville. However, we only find out who they are and what their business in town is a little later. Initially, most of the clear narrative information we receive comes from the lyrics to the song. As Deborah Allison points out, the ballad “outlines the main story elements, including the initiating events, the backstory, and the primary conflicts that must be played out at the film's climax.”<sup>10</sup> We have yet to see the film's hero, Marshal Will Kane (Gary Cooper), but through the lyrics (which present themselves as his words) we learn that it is his “wedding day”, that a man named Frank Miller, who has been in jail, will arrive on “the noonday train”, that, on Miller's arrival, Kane must kill him or be killed and that the marshal and his new wife view this impending confrontation differently, to the extent that it threatens their marriage. As my quotation from Allison has already indicated, the lyrics establish the narrative situation of the film's present, and suggest its roots in the past and potential resolution in the future – “the song jumps back and forth between tenses.”<sup>11</sup>

However, once this initial burst of condensed exposition has finished, once the song is over and the dumb show of the title sequence gives way to the more conventional action and dialogue of the rest of the film, the song remains, as it were, frozen in time. The direct second-person address adopted in the lyrics, with Ritter-as-Kane pleading with his wife not to abandon him, makes the song feel very much in the present, as if it belongs to a specific moment which is unfolding as we hear it. Although it addresses the past and the future, it does so from the fixed perspective of that single moment. Thus its temporal relationship, and indeed relevance, to the action shifts throughout the film.

This is only an issue because of the insistent presence of the song throughout the movie. Unusually for the time, Tiomkin used the ballad as the basis for the entire score to *High Noon*. As Jeff Smith explains,

Dimitri Tiomkin's *High Noon* (1952) popularised the monothematic or theme score, which organised its melodic and motivic material around a single popular tune rather than a group of leitmotifs.<sup>12</sup>

This means that almost all the music we hear in the film is a variation on the title song. As well as being “the source of practically every bar of the orchestral incidental music,”<sup>13</sup> sections of the song sung by Ritter recur at points throughout the film. These reprises, combined with the force with which the ballad was initially established, maintain a continuing awareness of the lyrics which extends to our understanding of the instrumental versions of the theme. As Allison argues, the instrumental cues that Tiomkin derives from the song “persistently remind the viewer of the corresponding lyrics.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus, each recurrence of the melody of the song effectively invites us to compare the fixed moment in time represented in the lyrics with the particular moment in the film that the music is accompanying. This combination can be quite straightforward and complementary, but it also results in moments of tension and even incoherence. Tiomkin uses the main theme for such a diverse array of purposes that no one example will be representative, but I will try to illustrate some significant tendencies.

The first time we actually see Will and Amy Kane (Grace Kelly) is at their wedding. In the first of several brief sequences there, intercut with scenes of the Miller gang arriving in town, the couple step forward to begin the ceremony [see *Illustrations*, Fig.

4.1]. Their movement is accentuated by the camera, which tracks towards them, lending the moment the emphatic quality of a star entrance. In the background of this short scene, we hear the main ballad theme played on a harmonium. Although the wedding is not taking place in the town's church (Amy Fowler Kane is a Quaker), the timbre of the instrument and the arrangement of the tune suggest a small-scale religious service.

Here, we can see the music being used for apparently simple illustration and clarification. The scene contextualises some of what we have heard in the full version of the ballad that opens the film. We find out whose wedding day the song was referring to. We meet the character whose voice Tex Ritter assumes (Will) and the character to whom the song is addressed (Amy). The music makes these connections absolutely explicit. Accompanying a wedding where the bride and groom are introduced as important characters (and the groom is played by an established star), its melody points us back to the lyrics (which, four minutes into the film, will still be fresh in our minds) and its instrumentation gestures to the convention of diegetic organ music for wedding scenes. The function of the music here is made clear by the fact that, when we return to the wedding after the next scene, the harmonium is replaced by orchestral underscoring. It would have been quite possible either to integrate the harmonium credibly into the scene by showing someone playing it in the corner of the room, or simply to maintain it as an unseen presence. However, it has served its illustrative purpose and is thus dispensed with.

I make this last point not to suggest that Tiomkin's score to *High Noon* is more mercenary than that of any other Hollywood movie, but rather to indicate that (at



least until the harmonium disappears) it is ambiguous whether or not the music in the first wedding scene is diegetic. The presence of a harmonium at a small 19<sup>th</sup> Century wedding is certainly plausible. Elsewhere in the film, the slippage between diegetic and non-diegetic music is much more pronounced, notably in the several times that Jack Colby, the one member of the Miller gang whom we do not hear speak, plays sections of the title song on harmonica. The effect of these devices is to suggest the presence of the ballad in the fictional world of the movie. This is indicative of a broader strand of self-consciousness in *High Noon*, of an inclination throughout the film to shift from narrative into commentary. This characteristic can also be seen in the tendencies towards speech-making in the screenplay and abstraction in the cinematography (for example, the number of prominently low-angled close-ups of Kane against the neutral background of the sky). This is the stylistic context in which to consider the film's foregrounding of the verbal dimension to its ballad. The filmmakers are clearly interested in what Rick Altman calls the "unique opportunity to editorialise" provided by "nondiegetic popular song lyrics"<sup>15</sup> (Altman even refers to *High Noon* as an example of this).

This is what makes the temporal disjunctions caused by the score's constant recollection of the lyrics significant. The style of the film encourages us to notice this sort of thing. The problem is, it is very difficult for Tiomkin to control which of the lyrics we think about. This is less of an issue when very short melodic phrases are taken from the song – variations on the line "Oh, to be torn 'twixt love and duty", with its narrow range of notes and busy, syncopated rhythm, are used to generate tension throughout the movie. However, Tiomkin often uses longer passages from the song, too. We may be able to recognise their particular relevance to a given

scene, but this is likely to exist alongside awareness of other, less pertinent lyrics, and especially the main topic of the song. In the case of the wedding scene discussed above, this works as a kind of foreshadowing. The ballad theme aids the scene-setting by reminding us of the “wedding day” line, but we understand the line in its wider lyrical context: “Do not forsake me, oh my darlin’ / On this our wedding day.” The focus of the song, expressed in the lyrics and emphasised by the position of the main melodic “hook”, is very much on the threat of abandonment. When we first see the Kanes, no such threat exists. They are getting married – in this respect Amy could scarcely be further from forsaking Will. But the music is already quietly evoking a different moment, when the thought of Amy leaving her husband is much more plausible.

Disjunctions like this become more pronounced as the film proceeds. As this happens, our awareness of them develops into something resembling melancholy. Shortly before the midday train arrives, Kane returns to his office and finds Herb Baker (James Millican), the only man in Hadleyville who he has been able to enlist to help him fight the Miller gang, waiting for him. The marshal has to explain to Herb that he could not convince anyone else to stand alongside them. Herb responds incredulously – “You’re joking.” Kane’s reply, “No, I couldn’t get anybody,” is emphasised by editing, performance and music. The film cuts from a wider shot of the office to a mid-shot of Kane at his desk, so that we see him deliver the line alone, leaning forward and fiddling with a box of bullets [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 4.2].

For this shot, the underscoring gives way to a brief but clear restatement of the first part of the main theme. The strong tonality of this passage separates it from the

more ambiguous harmonies either side of it; this effect is accentuated by a brief pause before the background music resumes. In any case, our attention is drawn to the line and we are invited to regard it as a distinct moment. Its effect depends on the tension between the isolation that the line, the shot choice and Cooper's performance evoke, and the musical reference to the ballad's refrain. Effectively, the music says, "Do not forsake me" at a moment where Kane is making it clear just how forsaken he already is (we should also note that by this point in the film Amy has already left him, and is preparing to take the train to St. Louis). In contrast to the wedding scene, where the music anticipates the trouble to come, here the theme looks back, appealing to a plea that has already been ignored, a promise that has already been broken (at least for the time being – Amy, of course, returns). As Philip Drummond observes, the song "plays a particularly poignant role in appealing for something not to happen which has, for most of the film, already taken place."<sup>16</sup> The mood this creates is fatalistic – the sense of futility and loss here makes this a melancholy moment.

A similar, but more overt combination of emphatic visual and musical strategies occurs not long after this scene, with the film's famous crane shot. The shot is preceded by a close-up on Kane's worn and anxious profile, and starts from a medium shot of the marshal, pulling out until he is a tiny figure on the empty streets of Hadleyville [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 4.3]. The main theme returns, in a particularly full orchestration, over the close-up and the camera movement is accentuated by a crescendo in the music. The expansive musical arrangement might conventionally be expected to evoke a sense of spaciousness and freedom, as it often does in the Aaron Copland-influenced strand of Western film music, exemplified by Jerome

Moross' score to *The Big Country* (William Wyler, Anthony Productions / Worldwide Productions, USA, 1958). Here, however, it emphasises the space around the solitary figure of Kane. Again, the main melody's capacity to recall the lyrics to the song has an ironic effect, repeating the same appeal to loyalty even over the film's most emphatic moment of isolation. The sense of melancholy evoked here is fleeting, however, since the main theme is interrupted by more conventional "suspense" music, with descending figures counteracting the previous musical and visual ascent, and a return of the "love and duty" motif.

### Disjunctions and Clashing Conventions

In these instances, around two-thirds of the way through the film, the incongruity of the music provides an interesting and sometimes effective tension. By the final moments of *High Noon*, however, the disparity between the song and the narrative has become confusing. At the very end of the film, as Will shows his contempt for the people of Hadleyville by discarding his marshal's badge and the reunited Kanes leave town, we hear a vocal reprise of the ballad's final verse and coda:

Do not forsake me, oh my darlin',  
 You made that promise when we wed.  
 Do not forsake me, oh my darlin',  
 Although you're grievin',  
 I can't be leavin',  
 Until I shoot Frank Miller dead.

Wait along  
 Wait along  
 Wait along  
 Wait along

Here, the relationship of the lyrics to the action is one of outright contradiction. The danger of Amy forsaking her husband has passed – she has returned to him and helped him defeat the Miller gang. The song puts the shooting of Frank Miller (Ian MacDonald) in the future tense, but we have already seen it happen. Perhaps most obviously, the song's assertion that "I can't be leavin'" and the instruction to "Wait along" (which sounds more like something a man would say to his horse or dog than to his wife) are countered by the sight of the Kanes pulling out of Hadleyville in their buckboard.

As well as slightly undermining the ending, this also illustrates one of the major characteristics of the film's monothematic score. Despite the wide variety of musical cues that Tiomkin generates from the title song, its insistent repetition lends the film an obsessive quality, a sense that everything in it is being constantly related back to a single topic. Christopher Palmer suggests that Tiomkin structured his score in this way to reflect "the film's thematic *idée fixe* – the deadly approach of "High Noon""<sup>17</sup>. But the song has its own different *idée fixe* – abandonment. In the lyrics, this consideration eclipses all others, even mortal danger ("I'm not afraid of death, but Oh, / What will I do if you leave me?") Through the music, a melancholy preoccupation with actual and possible loss pervades the whole film.

This needs to be understood in relation to the parallel deployment of conventions from both Western movies and popular music. Although the ballad contains many elements that mark it as Western – the instrumentation (guitar, accordion and drums), the use of old-fashioned language ("twixt") and regional dialect ("his'n") in the lyrics and the choice of self-styled cowboy and star of musical Westerns Tex

Ritter<sup>18</sup> to sing it – its subject matter is very much determined by its status as a popular song.

Part of the way in which the historical significance of *High Noon* is often understood relates to marketing. Much attention has been given to Tiomkin's successful and novel conception of the song's multiple commercial applications and the wider changes in the relationship between movies and popular songs that this brought about<sup>19</sup>. Tiomkin treated the song both as part of the film's promotion and as a potential pop hit, to be promoted in its own right. Although aspects of the song were altered for the various versions released as singles (notably the lyrics, which were made less specific), it remained substantially the same in content and style. Thus, these aspects had to be able to function coherently in both settings – the movie and the wider world of popular music.

This is achieved by the ballad's privileging of the romantic strand to the narrative, which allows it to use some of the most established popular music conventions, those of the love song. Looking back at an earlier intersection of Western movies and popular music, Richard Peterson notes that most of the songs from 1930s singing cowboy movies "did not deal with the joys and travails of heterosexual love relations, the pre-eminent theme of country music lyrics"<sup>20</sup> (and indeed, of popular song lyrics more generally). That this is the central topic of *High Noon*'s title song suggests a move towards the mainstream, which is also reflected in Stanfield's argument that the more marginal, rural audiences of 1930s Westerns became the more affluent, urban audiences of the post-war period<sup>21</sup>. But this does not mean that the respective mainstreams of movies and popular music fit together

unproblematically. In 1959, satirist, songwriter and mathematician Tom Lehrer used comic exaggeration to highlight the clashes between the two sets of conventions:

With the rise of the motion picture title song we have such hits of the past few years as, '*The Ten Commandments Mambo*,' '*Brothers Karamazov Cha-Cha*,' '*Incredible Shrinking Man*, I Love You' – I'm sure you're all familiar with these...<sup>22</sup>

By the late 1950s, then, it was possible to make a joke out of the consequences of shoehorning the relatively wide array of topics and settings covered by Hollywood into the conventional subject matter of popular music. In *High Noon*, the romantic bias of the ballad extends, via its ubiquity on the soundtrack, to the whole film, resulting in the sense of obsession that I have already observed.

This quality is very important to how we understand and respond to the character of Will Kane. Most of the reprises of the ballad that include Tex Ritter's vocals are used to accompany Kane walking the streets of Hadleyville, contemplating his predicament and trying to get help. It is clear from the presence of Ritter's voice singing lyrics from Kane's perspective that in these instances the song is meant to represent the marshal's inner monologue. Both Drummond<sup>23</sup> and Allison argue that this strategy adds complexity to the character, the latter claiming that it provides "an emotional depth that is less fully evident from his actions on screen."<sup>24</sup> This is true to some extent, inasmuch as the insistent presence of the song at its most explicitly verbal keeps reminding us of the situation he faces. However, it also demonstrates that depth is not the same as complexity. Using a single song to represent a character's whole inner life is bound to have a narrowing effect. Effectively, the expression of Kane's thoughts on any subject is limited to 155 words that we have already heard over the main titles.

As well as contributing to the overall obsessiveness of the score, this also renders Kane somewhat opaque. This is compounded by how quiet the vocal reprises of the song are, compared to the rest of the soundtrack (and especially the rest of the score). Ritter's voice seems distant or ghostly, and often fades in partway through a line. Although Allison suggests that this approach is "less intrusive"<sup>25</sup> than other forms of musical narration in Westerns (of which more shortly), it also has an obscuring effect, suggesting that our access to Kane's thoughts is incomplete or compromised.

*High Noon* has more success providing this access visually. The film strongly emphasises its star's face; we are given many opportunities to study his expressions and reactions in detail. In this respect, we are brought very close to Kane; we see the signs of emotional and physical wear on his face (which includes, of course, an acknowledgement of Cooper's advancing age – he was 51 when the movie was released<sup>26</sup>). As Drummond puts it, "we identify with the chain of voiceless looks which mark his acceptances of rejection and denial."<sup>27</sup> The expressiveness of Gary Cooper's face is a justly celebrated aspect of *High Noon*. Earlier in this thesis, I have already used Jane Tompkins' evocative description of it as an example of the self-contained melancholy of the Dandy<sup>28</sup>. Cooper's characteristic combination of tight lips and eyes slightly widened (for instance, when he is telling Herb to go home to his family) suggests despair kept under painful control. The disjunction between this visual explicitness and the more obscure evocation of Kane's inner state through the song is never resolved – we can feel sympathy for the beleaguered marshal, but the film seems to promise more involvement than it delivers. This combination of cryptic and overt pathos is characteristic of melancholy.



The melancholy that the film generates comes from moments of tension between its different conflicting aspects. This is a useful reminder that melancholy, although a complex and interesting state to evoke, is not in itself a criterion of value. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that much of the melancholy of *High Noon* results from a series of stylistic choices that do not really work together. It seems to be a side effect of the movie's combination of insistence and imprecision (a revealing index of this is that the film is frequently interpreted as a political allegory, but there is very little consensus as to what it actually stands for<sup>29</sup>). The film's title song exemplifies a wider tendency to both clarify and disrupt our relationship to its material. The result is melancholy, but it is only one of several disparate and not always coherent effects.

### *Rancho Notorious* – the Lost World

A Western that displays its contradictory aspects more deliberately is *Rancho Notorious*. Released shortly before *High Noon* and thus predating the trend for theme songs, *Rancho Notorious* uses its original ballad, 'The Legend of Chuck-a-Luck' as a form of direct narration. The song, written by Ken Darby and sung by Bill Lee, introduces and concludes the narrative and provides explanation and commentary at points in between. It mediates, with unusual overttness, between the world in which the story takes place and that of us in the audience.

As such, it acknowledges the distinction (and implicitly, the distance) between these two worlds. This is one of the aspects of the film's construction which has suggested a Brechtian reading. Robin Wood interprets *Rancho Notorious* as "a Brechtian

parable about patriarchal capitalist culture”<sup>30</sup>. Although, in his eagerness to dub Fritz Lang a “closet Marxist”<sup>31</sup>, he overemphasises the film’s political dimension, Wood does make a convincing case for *Rancho...* in these terms, both as an adaptation of Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* and as a social critique. However, the same elements that bear this reading out can also be used to support an argument for the movie as melancholy.

Like *High Noon*, much of the melancholy in *Rancho...* revolves around a sense of loss. However, the two movies contextualise this subject very differently. In Zinnemann’s film, the threat and the reality of loss are specific and localised. The title ballad, assisted by the film’s narrow spatial and temporal parameters (half a day in one town) and its insistence on Will Kane as the centre of our sympathies, establishes a focus on two possible losses, both specifically for Kane – the departure of Amy and the danger of death. *Rancho...* starts with the loss of life and love, with the rape and murder of Beth (Gloria Henry), the main character’s fiancée, but gradually reveals a world in which loss is more widespread and pervasive.

This is set up in the first verses of the ballad that we hear over the opening titles. Here, the song establishes our relationship to the rest of the movie. A key aspect once again is the representation of time. In contrast to the perpetual here and now evoked by the ballad in *High Noon*, ‘The Legend of Chuck-a-Luck’ places its story in the historical past, our access to which, it implies, is limited. This distinction is exemplified in the different perspectives adopted in the lyrics. Ritter sings as Kane – that is to say, as someone from the time at which the film’s story takes place – whereas Lee narrates retrospectively from the present.

'The Legend of Chuck-a-Luck' begins with an emphatic request for attention: "Oh-oh-oh listen! Listen well!" This sets it up as a ballad in the more traditional sense of the term – a narrative song or poem performed to an acknowledged audience. Carol Clover identifies a continuation of the same ancient tradition in the number of horror movies that open with a shot of an eye:

At one level, this "screen eye" is simply another in a long row of examples of the traditional call for attention: just as the first sounds of medieval romance – "Herkeneth" or "Escoutez" – apostrophise the collective ear of the audience, so the ocular opening images of cinematic horror apostrophise its collective eye.<sup>32</sup>

Whilst these eyes provide a novel twist on this convention, adapted to the medium of film, the opening of 'The Legend of Chuck-a-Luck' reproduces it much more faithfully. The song presents itself as an antiquated, even anachronistic storytelling mode.

Both the music and the lyrics consciously evoke a sense of the past. The opening lines quoted above are emphasised by blaring orchestral chords, but the arrangement becomes sparser for the main part of the song, with Lee's voice accompanied only by guitar and plucked double bass. This makes it feel more like a folk song. The regular repetitions of the phrase "Chuck-a-Luck" at the end of lines also add to this effect. Although some of us in the audience may know that it refers to a game of chance (and connect it to the lyric about "the gambler's wheel") its wider significance at this stage is far from clear. Indeed, the obscurity of the phrase is addressed by both the narrative of the film and the song itself later on. Initially, its prominence, minimal context and repetition make it a memorable but relatively

meaningless collection of syllables, comparable to the “nonsensical refrains [which] are common in the traditional ballad and folk song.”<sup>33</sup>

The lyrics also address the past more directly. This is the first verse:

Listen to the legend of Chuck-a-Luck, Chuck-a-Luck.  
Listen to the song of the gambler's wheel,  
A souvenir from a bygone year,  
Spinnin' a tale of the old frontier  
And a man of steel  
And the passion that drove him on, and on, and on.

Here, “the gambler's wheel” is a relic of the past, left over from a time that has otherwise vanished. The wheel and its song are our way of accessing this time. As such, they are melancholy objects – they bear a heavy weight of significance, having to represent their lost world metonymically. The terms in which this world is given to us, however, suggest that our access to it is limited. The story told in the song is explicitly set up as belonging to a particular genre – it is “a tale of the old frontier”. We are then informed that it concerns “a man of steel”, driven by “passion”. This archetypal description borders on cliché, suggesting a certain kind of separation from the past, where it can only be retrieved in an already mediated and conventionalised fashion.

Another generic element prominently adopted in both the lyrics and Lee's delivery of them is the use of a conventionally Western idiom. Consider the second verse:

It began, they say, one summer day,  
When the sun was blazin' down.  
'twas back in the early 'seventies  
In a little Wyomin' town.

Dropped “g”s and antiquated contractions like “’twas” are typical period touches used to lend a historical flavour to Western theme songs (they can also be heard in ‘High Noon’). Lee’s vocal performance gives them a particular emphasis. Of the three male singers of Western title songs that I will be discussing in this chapter, his is the voice that sounds the most formally trained. Thus, the colloquialisms sound more incongruous coming from him than from, say, Tex Ritter. This could certainly be interpreted as a Brechtian strategy, a way of implying a distance between performer and material. However, it can also be seen, alongside the other aspects that I have remarked upon – the traditional opening address, the folk song conventions and the archetypal elements – as suggesting distance of a more historical kind. These techniques both acknowledge and respond to the challenge of retrieving a story from the past. It is as if the world of the story is so far away, in time and in character, from the world of the present, that it can only be appropriately described in these archaic terms. Whilst the “old-time” music of the 1920s evoked a lost world in order to suggest the continuation of its traditions, the ongoing relevance of the past to the present, the emphasis in ‘The Legend of Chuck-a-Luck’ is on the remoteness of its represented past.

### Establishing a Relationship to the Past

The perspective on the past taken by *Rancho...* and its ballad can be further illustrated by comparison to two slightly earlier films, one a Western and one a war movie. *Wagon Master* (John Ford, Argosy Pictures, USA, 1950) and *A Walk in the Sun* (Lewis Milestone, Lewis Milestone Productions, USA, 1945) also use songs to frame their stories historically. In *Wagon Master*, the song ‘Wagons West’, written by

Stan Jones and performed by The Sons of the Pioneers, is just as explicitly retrospective as 'The Legend of Chuck-a-Luck'. The first lyrics that we hear in the movie are:

A hundred years have come and gone since 1849  
But the ghostly wagons rollin' West are ever brought to mind  
Their rollin', rockin' painted wheels were heard from shore to shore  
And always in the hearts of men it lives forever more.

Again, these words acknowledge the time that has elapsed between the frontier era and the period in which the film was made. However, 'Wagons West' offers us a more accessible version of the past, one whose relationship to the present is much more secure. The lines quoted above alternate between establishing the pastness of the film's events, and asserting that they remain an important and intensely felt part of popular memory.

The choice of The Sons of the Pioneers to perform the songs in *Wagon Master* is significant, given Stanfield's remarks (quoted above) about how the group exemplified the use of Western tropes to link the past to the present. The success of this strategy in the movie has nonetheless been disputed. Kathryn Kalinak argues that "the blatant artificiality" of the band's contemporary style "undercuts the authenticity of the images" and results in an experience which is "a bit jarring"<sup>34</sup>. Even Tag Gallagher, who is more sympathetic to the film's use of the group, remarks that "their unmistakably 1949 sound disturbingly distances the movie's pictorial action."<sup>35</sup> However, Gallagher contends that this is a deliberate disjunction, rather than an incoherent combination of elements that do not work together – "Ford's oxymoron is intentional"<sup>36</sup>. Gallagher's argument is that the music brings the

“additional dimension” of “legend”<sup>37</sup> to the movie, that it “apotheosises the you-are-there authenticity of the images”<sup>38</sup>.

Whether or not we entirely agree with this description of the film’s visual style, it is clear that its relationship with the music relies on this combination of the feeling of immediacy and the knowledge of distance. The images of the wagon train throughout the movie, and especially the river crossing, which we see three times (previewed under the opening titles, in its place in the narrative and reprised at the end), are photographed with a vivid intensity. The wagons are often shown with the sun behind them, picking out their silhouettes. The clear, dark lines of the wagons are juxtaposed with the irregular shimmering of the water [see *Illustrations, Fig. 4.4*]. The results are stylised, but not in a way that promotes a distanced perspective. If anything, the style of these images recalls Gilberto Perez’s description of Frank Capra as “painterly, a colourist in black-and-white film with a palette of lustre and sparkle, glimmer and glow, light subdued and diffused and resplendent.”<sup>39</sup> In *Wagon Master*, as in many of Capra’s films, the slight sense of the unreal or the magical is no barrier to audience involvement; in fact, it acts to intensify it. The vividness of the images in Ford’s film combines with the retrospective music to suggest the persistence of the past, the possibility of maintaining an intense relationship with it. The overwhelming emphasis is on continuity – even after the journey of the wagon train ends, the film returns to earlier images of movement, as Gallagher puts it, “back to passage rather than fulfilment”<sup>40</sup>. As I will go on to argue, the possibilities that are expressed here – being able to evoke and connect to the past – are presented in *Rancho Notorious* as lost.

*A Walk in the Sun* deals with much more recent history. Released shortly after the end of the Second World War, the film is about a US infantry platoon landing in Italy and their mission to take out an enemy position in a local farmhouse. Its narrating song, 'It Was Just a Little Walk in the Sun', was written by folk songwriters Earl Robinson (music) and Millard Lampell (lyrics) and performed by opera and folk singer Kenneth Spencer. The song is one of the main ways in which the film considers what it might be like to think of recent events as history, and what opportunities this perspective might afford. The movie begins with a shot of a desk, and a hand selecting a book to read. It then dissolves to a closer shot of the book, which doubles as the film's title card [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 4.5]. A voiceover by Burgess Meredith then explains that,

This book tells a story that happened long ago; way back in nineteen-hundred and forty three, when the lead platoon of the Texas Division hit the beach at Salerno, sunny Italy.

Although it was released only months after the end of the war, the film addresses its audience as if from a future in which it could be remembered more calmly, its experience softened by a sense of it as history. Meredith then goes on to provide affectionate introductions to the men of the platoon, who are each given their own page in the book, onto which the actor's credit and a mid-shot of the character marching are superimposed. Having introduced the soldiers, Meredith says, "Here's a song about them. Listen." There is a clear parallel here with the call for attention at the beginning of 'The Legend of Chuck-a-Luck'. However, there are some important differences. First of all, it is not a part of the song. This means that this ballad, although still a narrative song in the traditional vein, is not presented in quite as antiquated a manner. Also, the casting of Meredith, the memory of whose role a



few months earlier as famous war correspondent Ernie Pyle in *Story of G.I. Joe* (William Wellman, Lester Cowan Productions, USA, 1945) would have still been fresh, lends both familiarity and journalistic authority to the voiceover. Some of this authority is transferred, via the narrator's implicit approval, to the ballad. Although 'The Legend of Chuck-a-Luck' has been described as "an omniscient narrator"<sup>41</sup>, there is little in *Rancho...* that is presented as unproblematically trustworthy – the emphasis, in the song and elsewhere, is on rumours and second-hand accounts.

'It Was Just a Little Walk in the Sun' explicitly presents the transition into history and folklore of the events of the narrative. Over a page in the book showing the first lines of the lyrics under a stave showing the first phrase of the melody (as if inviting us to sing along), Spencer sings:

It was just a little walk  
In the warm Italian sun  
But it wasn't an easy thing.

And poets are writing  
The tale of that fight  
And songs for children to sing.

The lyrics refer to the process of converting these events into popular history, as well as implying a purpose to this activity. That children might sing of these and other skirmishes suggests that they could be used both as a patriotic celebration and as part of the children's historical and political education. The political dimension, suggested by the left-wing backgrounds of the two songwriters and screenwriter Robert Rossen, and more obliquely by the choice of the African-American Spencer as singer, becomes clearer as the film goes on. Shortly before the platoon lands at Salerno, the ballad stresses the unity and fellowship of the soldiers:

These are the men  
Of the Texas Division,  
United States Infantry.

They are moving in  
Through Hell and high water,  
Rivera and Friedman,  
Tyne and Porter,  
A Texan from Jersey  
And one from Dakota,  
A Texan from out near Duluth, Minnesota,  
Kansas, Maine and Tennessee – Lord God –  
They're all in the Texas Infantry  
They're all in the Texas Infantry

The lyrics confer the (implicitly heroic) status of honorary Westerner onto GIs of various different ethnic and geographical origins. The place names anchor the infantrymen in the ordinary, suggesting a celebratory focus on the common man. The music also contributes to this effect. At the end of each verse, it is possible to identify a resemblance, in melody, lyrical structure and vocal delivery (particularly Spencer's gospel-esque interjection of "Lord God"), to another tale of a heroic working man, the American folk song 'John Henry'.

The final instance of the ballad makes the political angle explicit. The end title of the film is another songsheet, printed on the back cover of the book we saw at the start. The lyrics to the final verse link various theatres of Second World War combat to the broader fight for freedom and hint at ongoing struggles in the USA:

It's the walk that leads down  
Through a Philippine town  
And it hits Highway seven, north of Rome;  
It's the same road they had  
Coming out of Stalingrad,  
It's the old Lincoln highway back home  
It's where ever (sic) men fight to be free.

Although a continuity is certainly implied, the book is also closed. The political interpretation suggested by the movie is dependent on a sense that the events it depicts have been concluded and resolved, and can thus be treated as a coherent object. The song can be seen as part of an attempt to establish that these events are in the past, that more direct and traumatic ways of experiencing them can be replaced with forms of celebration and education. These, of course, are dependent on historical distance.

### The Irretrievable Past

*A Walk in the Sun* turns the recent past into history in order to make sense of it. This option is not open to *Rancho Notorious*. Both *Wagon Master* and *A Walk in the Sun* rely on representing the continuing power and immediacy of the past, which can be either resurrected or productively channelled. In *Rancho...*, the links to the past are uncertain and obscure. Part of this has to do with the different kinds of history being told. In the two earlier movies, this history is public knowledge – the particular story of each movie is placed in the context of familiar historical events. It is also stressed that these events are well documented (*A Walk in the Sun*) or at least widely remembered (*Wagon Master*). No such context is provided in *Rancho...*. The focus of the story is narrow and private. The central location, Chuck-a-Luck, is a secret outlaw hideaway, accessible only to trusted initiates. The events of the film concern a small number of people, all of whom die.

This last point raises questions about the authority of the narrating song. *Rancho...* has been called a “*noir Western*”<sup>42</sup>, and in some respects we could regard the song

as equivalent to voiceover narration. Like a *noir* voiceover, it suggests both a relatively small and contained narrative world and a sense of pessimistic fatalism. However, unlike such narration, which would usually come from an identifiable character, the song is placed outside the spatial or temporal world of the film. We are offered no information as to where it comes from or who is singing it (we know from the credits that it is Bill Lee, but the singer is not given an explicit character identity, and we never see him). The source of the song's information is just as obscure as its origins – it recounts a tale that no one lived to tell. Even if we suspend disbelief about this apparently omniscient narrator and accept it as simply a part of the way the film delivers its story, this still places it outside of what we would conventionally regard as history. Wood identifies *Rancho...* as “an unusually pure example” of what he calls “the stylised western”, a strand of the genre that shows little interest in history (as opposed to “the historical western”<sup>43</sup>).

What we are offered in place of history is rumour, hearsay and uncertainty. This is one of the key aspects of the film's construction. It is established in the ballad, which qualifies its introduction to the story with, “they say”. This move is repeated at the end of the film, where the song informs us of the impending deaths of the two main male characters, Vern (Arthur Kennedy) and Frenchy (Mel Ferrer) – “they died that day, so the legends tell”. In between, the narrative is filled with second-hand accounts of the past. As well as the series of flashbacks in which Vern finds out about Altar Keane (Marlene Dietrich), the mistress of Chuck-a-Luck, these would also include Frenchy's account of his own past, the cautionary tale of Martinez the indiscreet ranch hand, the Wyoming doctor's euphemistic description of the rape and

murder of Beth (“Vern, I don’t know how to tell you this, but she wasn’t spared anything”) and the bawdy boasting of Wilson (George Reeves).

The film underlines the importance of their second-hand nature by also showing us a number of instances of miscommunication and false understanding. These include Vern’s initial inability to make sense of the name “Chuck-a-Luck”, the croupier in the final Altar flashback who mistakenly lets her win, thinking that she is shilling for the house, the incorrect rumour that Altar and Frenchy are “snug and warm” somewhere near the Mexican border, Vern’s inaccurate recollection of Altar’s surname and especially his suspicion that it was Wilson who raped and killed Beth. That so much is lost in translation suggests an imperfect or compromised connection to the past. This is generically unusual – Westerns by their very nature tend to present the reconstruction of the past as unproblematic, so much so that it does not always seem like the past. It is this portrayal of the past as something remote and irretrievable that is the source of the melancholy that pervades the film.

This problematic relationship with the past is felt in the film’s present as a loss of coherence and intensity. The exemplary figures here are Altar and Frenchy. She is at her most spectacular and he at his most heroic in the flashbacks. In the present, the emphasis is on their increasing age and diminished capacity. For Altar, this means the loss of her looks. As both Wood and Florence Jacobowitz point out, Altar’s power depends on her continuing ability to attract and charm men<sup>44</sup>. Altar herself acknowledges this, remarking that “Every year’s a threat to a woman.” The film exploits the contemporary understanding of Dietrich as an ageing star to present Altar as a woman confronting and trying to resist the erosion of her authority:

...one can watch the battle on the set being fought within the finished film, and Lang won. The more makeup Dietrich applies, the harsher, more unmerciful, and more anti-Sternbergian becomes Lang's lighting, so that one is aware throughout of an ageing woman trying to look much younger than her age, greatly increasing the character's (and the film's) poignancy.<sup>45</sup>

As Wood suggests, Lang makes Dietrich's striking features look angular and drawn. Memories of her as a younger star are evoked in the flashbacks, but are treated almost parodically, as if they cannot be straightforwardly retrieved. In the first flashback we see her participating in a mock horse race, with saloon girls riding on the backs of male patrons. This recalls, in a comic fashion, the polymorphous sexuality often displayed in Dietrich's films with Josef von Sternberg. The third flashback begins with Altar singing. Her bored, half-hearted delivery (her eyes wander about and she pauses to smoke and drink) comes across as a further exaggeration of Dietrich's already deadpan singing style [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 4.6]. We are never given access to the full potency of Altar's past allure. It is always mediated.

For Frenchy, the fading of former glories is presented as a kind of passivity, embodied in the relative physical slightness of Mel Ferrer. Although he does play some part in the film's violent action, our sense of him as powerful or threatening does not live up to the descriptions of him in the past. The story of his life that Frenchy tells to Vern evokes a number of familiar Western heroes, from Jesse James (Frenchy as a simple homesteader who turns outlaw when cheated out of his land by the rich and powerful) to Wyatt Earp (the gunfight in his story takes place in a corral). Elsewhere, talk of Frenchy stresses his chivalry and physical prowess. The heroism of the Frenchy we see however is considerably diminished.

The same can be said of the relationship between Altar and Frenchy. Their love is represented as bound up in a sense of the past. They meet in the third flashback and Frenchy later asserts that “Time holds us together. Time’s stronger than a rope.” In the context of the film’s representation of time and its effect on the couple as individuals, this faith in the power of the past is clearly misplaced. In the present, their mutual affection is certainly seen to endure, but passion is presented only fleetingly and with striking artificiality (the fire that flares up behind them when they kiss, which Wood describes as “deliberately ‘corny’”<sup>46</sup>) as if even the film does not quite believe it.

Vern tempts Altar by seeming to offer a restoration of the intensity of past feeling. She explains her attraction to him in these terms – “He makes you remember yourself a long time back.” What appeals to her as much as anything is the persistence with which he pursues her. She rewards him with a kiss “for trying” and then a slap “for trying too hard”, but the first of these two impulses proves to be stronger. She responds to his willingness to ignore her commitment to Frenchy, interpreting it as a sign of youthful impetuosity and vitality. Having followed Vern from the start, we know that he is deceiving Altar and that he is prepared to disregard Frenchy not out of irresistible attraction but because of his single obsessive aim to find out who killed Beth and take his revenge. He manipulates Altar to reveal that she got Beth’s brooch from Kinch (Lloyd Gough) by requesting that she dress up for him in an outfit that we have seen earlier. By doing this, he flatters her with the idea that her recent past could be thought of as nostalgically as her legendary earlier days and that her glamour can be reconstructed at will. That we know that this is a deception increases our sense of Altar’s loss.

Vern's behaviour towards Altar demonstrates that the film's emphasis on a loss of connections to the past also extends to him. In his case, it is the loss of the strength of his moral position, of our conviction that what happened to Beth justifies his actions in avenging her. As Wood points out, this happens gradually – "it is crucial to Lang's purpose that our sense of outrage should initially mirror and validate the hero's"<sup>47</sup>, but the film then "charts his progressive dehumanisation"<sup>48</sup>, culminating in "the ultimate revulsion...provoked by his treatment of Altar."<sup>49</sup> Vern acts as if the loss of Beth gives a coherence and a purpose to everything that he does, but this is clearly not so. The excesses he commits in her name no longer relate meaningfully to her.

The clearest manifestation of this is Vern's disproportionate focus on Altar in the pursuit of his revenge. As Jacobowitz summarises,

...it is Altar who haunts Vern when the logic of a revenge Western would place Kinch, the outlaw who unquestionably committed the crimes of rape and murder, as the prime object of the hero's search and the focus of the narrative.<sup>50</sup>

It is significant that "getting even with Kinch is anticlimactic in comparison."<sup>51</sup> It shows that Vern's quest for revenge is less a search for justice than an attempt to make the loss of Beth meaningful. So much of his rage is directed at Altar not because she is the most guilty, but because all the signs he follows point to her. It is her name, and that of her place, that he hears when trying to track Beth's killer. And it is the sight of Beth's brooch pinned to Altar's dress that confirms that he is in the right place. Vern is deeply invested in the reliability of these clues. This is a version of Walter Benjamin's melancholy "loyalty to the world of things", which I discussed earlier in this thesis<sup>52</sup>. Vern clings to the objects that make a coherent narrative out



of the aftermath of Beth's death, that make it a beginning rather than an ending. Hence all the seething that he does at Wilson, whose scars on his cheek Vern assumes must have been inflicted in the struggle with Beth.

Vern's melancholy insistence, in the face of a world of broken connections, that his actions should mean something, is reflected in the musical narration. The second appearance of the song occurs just after Vern has first heard the name "Chuck-a-Luck" from the dying Whitey (John Doucette). The lyrics in this section start with:

Now, where and what is Chuck-a-Luck? Chuck-a-Luck?  
Nobody knows and the dead won't tell.

A few lines later, the song describes Vern's attempts to establish the significance of Chuck-a-Luck:

Night and day, early and late,  
He looks for a place, or a town, or a face...

These lines are heard over a shot of a buckboard riding into a generic Western town. The word "face" prompts a cut to two successive medium close-ups of anonymous grizzled frontiersmen [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 4.7]. The shots are given no context; they appear abstract and entirely motivated by the song. These literal connections between images and lyrics parallel Vern's state of mind, his need for things to be meaningful. Chuck-a-Luck effectively becomes the name that encompasses everything he is looking for and the song dramatises him trying out different objects to take the weight of this meaning. Ultimately, the significance of everything that Vern encounters is measured against its ability to embody his personal obsession. This is also reflected in the song – each occurrence of it ends on the line "Hate,

Murder and Revenge.” Whatever comes before it is brought back to this central thematic.

### *Johnny Guitar* – Asserting Control and Coherence

The relationship between a song and melancholy efforts to make the world coherent is also explored in *Johnny Guitar*, another Western that features an ageing female star (in this case, Joan Crawford). Its eponymous title song is only revealed as such when we hear Peggy Lee singing it in the film’s closing seconds. Up to this point, it has only been heard as an instrumental theme, composed by Victor Young. This gives the song a different relationship to the narrative from the Western title songs that I have already discussed. The difference here relates to Claudia Gorbman’s observation that the function of much film music is to specify: “It *interprets* the image, pinpoints and channels the “correct” meaning of the narrative events depicted.”<sup>53</sup> Both *High Noon* and *Rancho Notorious* use the lyrics to their songs to introduce a high degree of specificity straight away. The songs thus become a means of relating everything back to a particular idea (Kane’s crisis in *High Noon*, “Hate, Murder and Revenge” in *Rancho...*). In *Johnny Guitar*, the introduction at the last possible moment of the lyrics (written by Lee) means that for most of the movie the meaning of the song is more ambiguous. When it finally achieves a kind of (verbal) specificity at the end, this forms part of a wider narrative resolution.

What is being resolved (or at least tentatively affirmed) here is the efforts of the main couple, and especially of Vienna (Crawford), to take control of their situation. That the song forms a significant part of this is indicated by the fact that Vienna and

Johnny “Guitar” Logan (Sterling Hayden) each play a version of it at some point during the movie. At first, the song is disputed territory for the two characters, the site of one of the film’s many different struggles for authority and control. Vienna asks Johnny to “play something” for her and to “put a lot of love in it”. His compliance with her request is initially contextualised as an assertion of his commitment to work for her, rather than the Dancing Kid (Scott Brady). However, the choice of the song we will come to know as ‘Johnny Guitar’ to represent this commitment is not well received and Vienna tells him very quickly to stop. The tune is presented as an evocation of their shared past, of their previous life as a couple. V.F. Perkins describes Johnny’s performance of it as an “invitation to revisit an undefined scene of shared ecstasy and anguish.”<sup>54</sup> Johnny offers a comparison between their new professional relationship and whatever transpired between them in the past. Vienna rejects this comparison as a threat to both her authority as his employer and her privacy, because the song threatens to bring intimate feelings into a public setting. At this stage, the characters’ different attempts to control how situations are interpreted are in tension – Johnny’s suggestion of how things might be understood is overruled by Vienna.

Bringing the couple back together in the film depends on them agreeing on a way of representing their relationship to themselves and each other. This involves trying to aestheticise its more negative aspects – the time they have spent apart, what has happened to them in the meantime and why they parted to begin with – successfully. As Johnny and Vienna regain their intimacy, the conflicts between them that revolve around these issues are expressed through increasingly stylised dialogue. At the

end of the first long sequence in Vienna's saloon, she and Johnny speak in a way that James Harvey refers to as,

...less like talk than an exchange of song titles: e.g. Vienna's 'When a Fire Burns Itself Out (All You Have Left Is Ashes)' – or her 'He Wasn't Good, He Wasn't Bad (But I Loved Him)'.<sup>55</sup>

Similarly, in the night-time scene where the couple are reconciled, Harvey describes Johnny's question, "How many men have you forgotten?" and Vienna's answer, "As many women as you've remembered" as "more like lyrics, closer to song than sense."<sup>56</sup> These exchanges come across as attempts to find a style, to try out different ways of representing the problems they face as a couple that might make them seem more bearable. They are unsuccessful, first because Johnny tries to behave as if nothing has changed and then because he takes too much of an attitude of self-pity. He eventually finds an effective way of thinking about the situation when he offers to Vienna the description of the past five years as "a bad dream" and presents her with a nostalgic vision for the two of them to inhabit together:

We're having a drink at the bar in the Aurora Hotel, the band is playing, we're celebrating because we're getting married and after the wedding we're getting out of this hotel and we're going away. So laugh, Vienna, and be happy – it's your wedding day.

The scenes in which these negotiations take place are accompanied by orchestral arrangements of the title song. It thus becomes a *leitmotif* for this sort of effort – the assertion of control, the contrivance of positive possibilities. This can be heard in the melody (which Harvey repeatedly describes as "melancholy"<sup>57</sup>). Its opening phrases consist of a series of rising figures before the harmony resolves. This conveys a sense of striving or reaching for something. Elsewhere in the film, the theme

suggests the conscious effort behind activities such as Vienna's lighting of the lamps in her chandelier. Between the music, the equivalent of candles and Vienna's white dress, this action becomes a ritual performance of control and aesthetic order [see *Illustrations, Fig. 4.8*].

These implicit tendencies in the music are confirmed when we finally hear the lyrics.

The section of the song that accompanies the end of the movie is:

Whether you go, whether you stay, I love you.  
What if you're cruel? You can be kind, I know.  
There was never a man like my Johnny,  
The one they call Johnny Guitar.

Perkins calls it "a reproachful song of adoration, addressed by a woman to a man, and focused on the anxiety and pain of her attachment."<sup>58</sup> The emphasis on these damaging elements makes them an integral part of the love being expressed. The lyrics enlist negative characteristics to affirm a superior degree of intimacy ("You can be kind, I know.") and the transcendent power of both the love itself and the mythic lover. Here, once again, problems are transformed and redeemed through representation. Lee's singing, although more relaxed and sensual than Crawford's clipped, mannered speech, shows some of the same signs of control. Perkins remarks of Lee that, "She was renowned for the subtlety of her musicianship rather than her force; her way with a song was soft, warm and delicate."<sup>59</sup> It is possible to hear, at the end of *Johnny Guitar*, the strict control of timing and dynamics required for Lee to achieve these effects.

These various attempts to establish control and coherence – in the music, in the dialogue and in Crawford's character and performance – are put into a context that

makes them melancholy. The type of social and physical world offered to us by the movie is so hostile and chaotic that the actions and impulses I have discussed seem all the more deliberate by contrast. They become defiant responses to the knowledge of how bad things can be. Harvey detects this quality in the film's many confrontations: "those ritual standoffs we've been watching have all in their different ways been strategies *against* humiliation, keeping the nastiness at bay."<sup>60</sup> That the context is crucial to our understanding of this is clear in Perkins' remarks about Ray's direction of Crawford:

He stresses and exaggerates Vienna / Crawford's command, but frames it precariously (as in the construction of the décor) so that it emerges not as the authority of confidence or vanity – in which case the exterior and the interior would be without tension – but as an insistence born of terror.<sup>61</sup>

She does not seem arrogant or dictatorial because the world she inhabits does not give her the power and freedom to think or act that way. The environment around her is too unremittingly threatening.

### Intensity and Isolation

The world of *Johnny Guitar* can be interestingly compared to that of *Rancho Notorious*. The melancholy of *Rancho...* comes from a general depletion of intensity and conviction, a global sense of weariness and lost purpose. Conversely, the world we see in *Johnny Guitar* is altogether too intense and without meaningful respite. This is reflected in the colour schemes of the two movies. The palette in *Rancho...* is for the most part relatively muted (perhaps its *noir* elements incline it towards monochrome), whereas *Johnny Guitar* is famously vivid, even garish.

Another significant comparison would be in the ways in which the two movies represent mainstream society. In *Rancho...*, society is shown to be lifeless and ineffectual. The recurring image that the film provides is that of a group of older men sitting around doing nothing: the posse from Vern's home town that refuse to accompany him into Sioux country, the men we see congregating on a porch as Vern hears the story of how Altar met Frenchy [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 4.9] and the groups of politicians, both prisoners and jailers, in the Gunsight town jail. As such, society poses only an occasional threat to the outlaw community at Chuck-a-Luck, and can be held at bay (Chuck-a-Luck is eventually destroyed by internal conflict caused by Vern, who is shown to have abandoned "legitimate" society). In *Johnny Guitar*, the characters are continually subjected to what Perkins calls "the intrusions of a corrupt and demanding society."<sup>62</sup> The hysterical vigilante posse headed by Emma Small (Mercedes McCambridge) and McIvers (Ward Bond) persecute Vienna and her associates throughout the movie and make her position in town increasingly untenable. The posse is represented as a chaotic and elemental force – Johnny remarks that "A posse isn't people... A posse is an animal."

This links the vigilantes to the film's presentation of its physical environment. This is characterised by an intense and invasive turbulence and expressed most effectively through noise. The world of *Johnny Guitar* is a noisy one, and the sources of the noise are destructive and beyond the characters' control – the explosions set off by the railway blasting crews up in the mountains, the violent dust storm outside Vienna's place in the early part of the movie and the fire that consumes it later on. An important distinction is set up between this kind of surrounding noise and sounds intentionally made by the characters. As well as the musical performances, this

would also include Vienna's recurring gesture of spinning her roulette wheel, as if she found the whirring sound it makes somehow comforting. This is part of the context that gives the title song its melancholy. It is a conscious expression of coherence and beauty in an environment that conspicuously lacks these qualities.

Its connection with Johnny and Vienna therefore also emphasises their status as outsiders. This is partly conveyed through musical style. Harvey suggests that Young's tune was "borrowed"<sup>63</sup> from Spanish composer Enrique Granados. Its minor-key harmonies and melodic ornamentations certainly sound Spanish, a quality further reinforced by the featured use of guitar. Spanish elements are common enough in the scores for Westerns – they are usually used to suggest the atmosphere of Mexico and the American Southwest. In this case, however, the theme, with its languid phrasing and measured pace, seems more "classically" European. In American culture, Europe is often conventionally associated with history and the past. This association resonates with our sense of Vienna's age. Harvey describes *Johnny Guitar* as "a movie about being middle-aged and a bit played out."<sup>64</sup> Unlike *Rancho Notorious*, though, which gives us weary people in a weary world, *Johnny Guitar* reserves this quality for its main couple, juxtaposing their diminishing vitality with the continuing demands of a malevolently energetic environment.

Vienna's age and marginal social status are also suggested by her name. Most obviously, it is that of an ancient European city. As a likely pseudonym (Perkins groups it with other "evidently assumed identities"<sup>65</sup> in the film) with European connotations it also subtly implies prostitution. It is a standard convention for



prostitutes in Westerns to affect a European (usually French) persona; such associations became a way of representing prostitution without risking censorship. The strong suggestion that at least some of Vienna's wealth was acquired in this way is one of the sources of her social persecution in the film. Vienna's separation from the society of the town is also emphasised by Joan Crawford's star persona. Pamela Robertson characterises her casting in a Western as "the anachronistic insertion of the decidedly urban and twentieth-century type Crawford represents into a rural nineteenth-century setting"<sup>66</sup>. This side of her is eloquently expressed through costume, particularly the fringed gloves she wears during the buggy ride with Johnny, which seem like a chic modern feminisation of the more conventional male Westerner's buckskins [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 4.10]. Vienna is thus doubly anachronistic, both too old and too modern for the setting of the movie. The title song, which draws on both European traditions and the popular contemporary sound of Peggy Lee, contributes to this sense of her isolation.

Music is also an important part of our understanding of Johnny as an outsider. His (again) assumed identity as an itinerant musician parallels his previous one as a wandering gunslinger. Both of these set him apart from the town's society (he famously remarks "I'm a stranger here myself") but it is the role of musician that allows him to separate himself more clearly from its conflicts and politics. The film seems to allude to the capacity of musicians, as marginal figures, to comment on society from an external perspective. This is clearest just after the first major confrontation with Emma, when Johnny strums a chord on his guitar and sings "Oh her name was Emma Small, was Emma Small," as if this were the start of a bawdy song about Vienna's repressed and vindictive adversary.

This is another example of Johnny and Vienna's attempts throughout the film to find different ways of representing a threatening and unfriendly world. These efforts are shown to be both necessary as a form of self-protection and very difficult to achieve and maintain. This sense of precariousness has a stylistic parallel in what Perkins calls the film's "aesthetic suspense"<sup>67</sup>: the feeling that the carefully pitched intensity of the movie could at any point tip over into ridiculous excess. It also relates to the lingering tension at the end of the movie, as the couple kisses in front of a waterfall and Peggy Lee sings. Harvey observes a disparity between Lee's lyrical aggrandisement of "The one they call Johnny Guitar" and our experience of the film up to this point:

But that's not exactly right – *is* it? Oh, well. He's certainly a nice guy – so why not? Actually, its *not* being "exactly right" is what makes it feel right for the end of *this* movie... it's appropriate certainly – in its inaccuracy – to a movie that at once subverts and sustains its own romanticism.<sup>68</sup>

The final image of the film is insistently celebratory, but also shows the couple as separate and isolated, having crossed through the waterfall away from the site of the final confrontation. Combined with the title song, this seems to acknowledge the fragility of what it being affirmed. Our ongoing awareness (and knowledge of the characters' own awareness) of the distance between positive assertions and the world that they come from preserves a strong sense of melancholy.

### *River of No Return* – The Impracticality of Melancholy

Sometimes, of course, melancholy can be acknowledged too much, to the point that it is indulged. This is the danger that is addressed and examined in the last Western I will be discussing, *River of No Return*. In this film, melancholy is once again

expressed through the title song, 'River of No Return', composed by Lionel Newman with lyrics (as in *Rancho Notorious*) by Ken Darby and sung by Tennessee Ernie Ford. Melancholy attitudes are still used by the characters to impose coherence on their world, but here this is portrayed as unhelpful, even damaging. Melancholy is an impediment that the characters must overcome in order to adapt effectively to changing circumstances and connect with one another. An unsigned *Movie* editorial on Preminger called him "the enemy of preconceptions, snap judgements, closed minds."<sup>69</sup> The inflexibility and fatalism of melancholy – the tendency, from a melancholy perspective, to view things as already lost and disconnected and the inability to conceive of any other way of looking at them – would seem to fall into this category, of attitudes that Preminger's movies are said to reject.

A number of critics have also characterised *River of No Return* as based around the conflict and eventual compromise between the two opposing points of view embodied by Matt Calder (Robert Mitchum) and Kay Weston (Marilyn Monroe). Harlan Kennedy notes the use of CinemaScope in presenting this conflict: "mostly Marilyn Monroe stood at one end of the newly widened screen and Mitchum stood at the other"<sup>70</sup>. When arguing for the significance of the mise-en-scène towards the end of the movie in relation to this theme, Perkins offers this summary:

... the film's story has been moulded to this point as a confrontation between two ways of thinking and living. Matt the farmer and the showgirl Kay have come to represent moral extremes, the one static and unbending, the other lacking purpose and definition; the one joyless, the other irresponsible. A too complete reliance on law and reason confronts an excessive surrender to intuition and feeling.<sup>71</sup>

It is easy enough to see how Kay's outlook, as Perkins describes it, could become a kind of melancholy resignation (the word "surrender" is key here, in its evocation of

her limited sense of her own capacity and options). There is also, however, a melancholy to Matt's side of the conflict. Matt's adoption of the simple but strenuous life of a farmer is shown to be at odds with the values of the gold rush going on in the surrounding area. Harry Weston (Rory Calhoun) remarks to Matt that "Everybody and his brother for a hundred miles around is looking for gold and you're digging a farm." This is represented not just as an assertion of an alternative way of living, but as a rejection of the aspirations of gold prospectors and gamblers like Harry. In the context of what has come before it – the death of Matt's wife and especially the time he has spent away from his family in prison – we understand that his refusal of luxury and ease involves an element of penance for past irresponsibility. The casting of Mitchum, a star particularly adept at conveying a sense of guilt and the moral burden of the past, also emphasises this dimension. Matt explains his choice to his son, Mark (Tommy Rettig), as a particular kind of new beginning:

I was away from you a long time, Mark. That's when I thought about it. I thought, if a man doesn't know what he's doing, or where he's going, why, the best thing for him to do is just back up and start all over again. I thought I'd start with the ground and work up.

Matt's insistence on starting again with almost nothing, bringing himself down low before he proceeds any further, suggests an element of self-punishment. His desire to return to "the ground" also resonates with the iconography of melancholy – Walter Benjamin observes that "the downward gaze is characteristic of the saturnine man, who bores into the ground with his eyes."<sup>72</sup> The term "saturnine" is associated with both melancholy and agriculture (Saturn being the god of the latter). Matt demonstrates a link between the two. His return to the earth is prompted by loss – of his wife, of time and contact with his family, of purpose and of moral authority (he is

imprisoned for shooting a man in the back, albeit to save the life of a friend) – and accompanied by a reduced sense of possibility that parallels Kay's.

This is shown to be an impediment for both characters. The distaste with which Matt regards Kay and the world that she comes from demonstrates that his attitude exceeds practicality and becomes a kind of puritanism. His narrow view cannot account for her more positive qualities, or for the conditions that she has had to survive in. When she sings 'Down in the Meadow' for the second time in the movie, as a lullaby for Mark, Matt is surprised that she knows "a song like that". She responds by indicating how reductive and partial his conclusions about her are: "I didn't go straight from the cradle to a gold camp." On Kay's side, the limitations of her perspective (exemplified by her intense but misguided devotion to Harry) mean that she sees no alternative to a life that, as Perkins suggests, makes her unhappy:

...we are gradually shown that neither Matt's reliance on law and reason nor Kay's on emotion has proved completely satisfactory. Kay expresses a distaste for the life of the saloons that Preminger nowhere endorses. The film leads us to the conclusion, not that Kay's life is wrong in absolute terms, but that it is wrong (because unproductive) *for Kay*.<sup>73</sup>

It is against this sort of standard of practicality, discernible throughout the film, that we must judge the melancholy of the title song. From the very start of *River...*, the song is used to set up a conflict between the practical and the abstract, the material and the ethereal. These two sides are juxtaposed in the combination of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds heard over the film's opening image. The first thing we see in the movie is Matt chopping down a tree [see *Illustrations, Fig. 4.11*]. The hard, insistently physical thumping and cracking sounds that this produces are contrasted with the introduction to the song. We hear a distant-sounding female choir

repeatedly sing “Wail-a-ree” (which we will soon know as the siren-like call of the river in the song) with a slow, loose tempo and long, sustained notes. The overall effect is somewhat ghostly.

This establishes one of the main functions of the score for the rest of the film. Parts of the title song, and several of the other songs performed in the movie, are used as *leitmotifs* to indicate the spectral presence of the characters’ concerns and preoccupations as Matt, Mark and Kay travel down the river. The otherworldly element is maintained in the handling of the non-diegetic music – it is often mixed low and faded in slowly. We are frequently reminded of the river’s continuing presence (and threat) through the main theme, and the persistence of Kay’s connection to Harry is repeatedly expressed through her song ‘I’m Gonna File My Claim’, played slowly and bluesily on a faint upright piano.

The lyrics to the title song also suggest a world somehow separated from ordinary experience. This is indicated in the opening line, “There is a river called the River of No Return.” As well as introducing the mythically fatalistic name of the river, this also establishes a particular relationship between singer, listeners and subject matter. The significant element here is that we need to be told that the river exists at all (“*There is* a river...”). This type of opening line is familiar from both folk and popular music – a well-known example would be the line “There is a house in New Orleans,” from ‘The House of the Rising Sun’. It is used to suggest that the subject of the song is something obscure or out of the ordinary, and that the singer is granting us special access to it, via an account of their own experiences. The experience recounted in ‘River of No Return’ is the loss of love: “I lost my love on the

river, and forever my heart will yearn". The superior knowledge claimed by the voice adopted in the lyrics seems to be a direct consequence of this loss. This invokes the classically melancholy trope of insight gained through suffering.

Melancholy can also be detected in the figurative language used in the song. The lyrics offer us a personification of love, whose loss is symbolised in the endless movement of the river:

Love is a traveller on the River of No Return,  
Swept on forever,  
To be lost in the stormy sea.

In 'One Silver Dollar', another of the movie's songs, performed by Kay in the Tent City saloon, we similarly hear that:

Love is shining dollar,  
Bright as a church bell's chime,  
Gambled, and spent, and wasted  
And lost in the dust of time.

Both sets of lyrics locate their symbolic and emotional significance in the physical world of objects (this is more overt in 'One Silver Dollar', but the same tendency can also be observed in the title song). As we have seen, this is a characteristically melancholy perspective to take. In each case, love also inevitably leads to loss. The coin in 'One Silver Dollar' is almost a cursed object, passed from unfortunate owner to unfortunate owner, silently recording their losses as it goes:

Spent on a baby's trinket,  
Won by a gambler's lust,  
Pierced by an outlaw's bullet  
And lost in the blood-red dust.

The song's equation of love and money can also be seen as a melancholy romanticising of Kay's own situation. Both her job, in which she relies on her sexual allure as a performer, and her relationship with Harry, who borrows money from her and promises her jewels and clothes, can be thought of in the same way. It is striking that both the songs she performs in Tent City, 'One Silver Dollar' and 'I'm Gonna File My Claim', rely on the same connection. Unlike the characters in *Johnny Guitar*, however, Kay gains nothing from representing her situation in terms of melancholy stylisation. The upward reaching of the minor-key melody to *Johnny Guitar*'s title song is replaced with the downward trajectory of that to 'One Silver Dollar', suggesting disappointment and resignation.

As this suggests, Kay's melancholy is reflected in her relationship to objects. Perkins relates "Kay's gradual loss of the physical tokens of her way of life"<sup>74</sup> to,

...the character's moral development from fatalistic acceptance towards a degree of self-conscious decision. The two movements are united in the final shot of the movie: the heroine herself removes and throws away a pair of flashy red shoes, her last remaining item of "uniform".<sup>75</sup>

As Kay abandons these objects, then, she also abandons her previous understanding of what they mean. What makes her initial attitude fatalistic is her sense of the significance of objects, and the situation they relate to, as fixed and permanent. Her life to her consists of a series of objects whose usefulness and value are assumed without question. Hence, when she loses her bag, she refers to her shoes as "all I've got left." Again, the casting of the role is an important factor. Part of Monroe's star persona involves an emphasis on her physical qualities, on our awareness of her body and a sense that the other characters in her movies regard her predominantly in terms of her sexual allure. Thus, we understand that Kay is



likely to have been extensively treated as if she was herself an object, and that this may have contributed to her understanding her life in this way.

What needs to be overcome in the narrative of *River...* is not simply the wrongness of Kay's fatalism, but also its attraction for her. As we saw in *Johnny Guitar*, a melancholy attitude like Kay's can be used to bring sense to senseless circumstances, and this sort of coherence can be a consolation. Consolation is precisely what melancholy offers the characters in *River...*, especially Kay. This can be seen in her performance of the title song in the Black Nugget saloon in Council City just before the end of the movie. In it, she demonstrates her renewed surrender to melancholy, having suffered further loss. Harry has been killed, shot by Mark to save Matt, and Kay and the Calders have parted. The lyrics to the song reflect the loss of both potential partners, Harry and Matt:

I lost my love on the river  
And forever my heart will yearn  
Gone, gone forever,  
Down the River of No Return.

These lines offer Kay a romantic combination of tenderness and futility, a permanent connection to lost love at the cost of abandoning hope and settling for less. Her performance of the song combines a remoteness (she stares out past her audience) and a sense of physical indulgence (Monroe sings in her characteristic breathily erotic style). Both detachment and bodily surrender are conveyed in her repeated gesture of closing her eyes [see *Illustrations*, Fig. 4.12]. At the end of the song, she sighs, "Never..." as if completely resigned to the apparent permanence of her melancholy situation. By physically lifting her out of the saloon and back into a world where alternatives, like rejoining the Calder family, are conceivable, Matt breaks

through what Richard McGuinness refers to as the “satisfaction” of “passive, self-blaming states.”<sup>76</sup> Part of the source of this satisfaction is its stability and familiarity. This is what makes a reprise of the title song such an effective way to represent Kay wallowing in melancholy. By this point in the film, it has become comfortably familiar. We have spent time with the main musical theme, as well as with Kay, Matt and Mark.

The allure of melancholy is in the title song from the start, in its lush choral and orchestral arrangements and in the depth and resonance of Ernie Ford’s voice. What the song also conveys, however, is the film’s genre. The choice of Ford, a country singer, is significant here. Like Tex Ritter, Tennessee Ernie Ford asserts a regional identity through his name. In this case, it is Southern, rather than Western, but I have already argued that associations with the South are a recurring feature in Westerns<sup>77</sup>. The onomatopoeic “Wail-a-ree” used to represent the beckoning call of the river is also a generic touch. Like similar terms, such as the bird name “Whippoorwill”, it suggests a folksy, personal relationship to nature familiar from both Country music and Western movies.

I make this slightly obvious concluding point in recognition of the danger of treating *River...* solely as a Preminger film, rather than a Western. The emphasis in the movie on practicality and compromise can be clearly and usefully related back to the director, but the film is also a product of Preminger’s engagement with various generic tropes. Chris Fujiwara’s contention that “Preminger’s films are absolutely heedless of genre”<sup>78</sup> seems difficult to defend – how else can we understand *Anatomy of a Murder* (Carlyle Productions, USA, 1959), for example, except as a

courtroom drama? It is true, though, that *River...* employs many of its generic conventions in a non-standard manner. Consider the film's presentation of backshooting. The revelation that Matt shot a man in the back damages his relationship with his son. Mark judges his father, as Perkins puts it, "by the rules which Matt has been teaching him to regard as absolute."<sup>79</sup> The film's solution to this is not for Matt to make redress for committing the genre's quintessential dishonourable act, but for Mark to have to shoot Harry in the back to save his father. As McGuinness argues,

The son's killing crystallises the necessity vs. propriety of such an act, Mitchum achieves a certain amount of liberation from having his life saved in this improper yet common-sense way by his son, and Preminger thereby avoids the inevitability and fatalism of most westerns, where the guilt-obsessed hero either has to become drawn into more evil action until he is destroyed, sacrifice himself for those he loves, or prove himself through impossible Herculean tasks.<sup>80</sup>

Whilst this demonstrates Preminger's unconventional, even critical, treatment of the genre, it does not constitute an abandonment of it. The tension in *River...* between the use of generic tropes and the expectations that surround them is dependent on the movie being a Western.

This is significant because the film's rejection of some of the values associated with Westerns can be connected to its refusal of melancholy. Both the genre and the mood are introduced via the title song and then interrogated by the narrative. I have no desire to argue that melancholy is an inherent part of the Western genre, but in this case they are certainly treated as if they are related to one another, or at least exist comfortably together. The title songs to *High Noon*, *Rancho Notorious*, *Johnny Guitar* and *River of No Return* all advance a melancholy perspective on the world of

their film. *River...* is the only movie of the four in which this perspective is not endorsed. Despite this, melancholy retains a strong presence in the film. Thus, the movie acknowledges something that is also implied in the most frequently quoted passage from Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*: "I write of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy"<sup>81</sup>. To banish melancholy, you must first summon it.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Barney Hoskyns, *Hotel California: singer-songwriters and cocaine cowboys in the LA canyons, 1967-1976* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), pp. 165-167.

<sup>2</sup> Reggae producer Lee "Scratch" Perry's band The Upsetters had a popular instrumental hit with 'Return of Django' (Trojan, 1969), inspired by the Italian Western *Django* (Sergio Corbucci, B.R.C. Produzione S.r.l., 1966). A number of artists in the Dancehall sub-genre also adopted Western-derived pseudonyms, such as Clint Eastwood, Lone Ranger, Johnny Ringo and Josey Wales.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Clarke, *The Rise and Fall of Popular Music* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Stanfield, *Horse Opera*, p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 54-55.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>9</sup> McVeigh, *The American Western*, p. 81 and p. 105.

<sup>10</sup> Deborah Allison, "Do Not Forsake Me: The Ballad of High Noon' and the Rise of the Movie Theme Song', *Senses of Cinema* (2003), [http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/28/ballad\\_of\\_high\\_noon.html](http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/28/ballad_of_high_noon.html), accessed April 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Jeff Smith, *The Sounds of Commerce: Marketing Popular Film Music* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 45.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Palmer, *The Composer in Hollywood* (London: Marion Boyars, 1990), p. 142.

<sup>14</sup> Allison, "Do Not Forsake Me: The Ballad of High Noon' and the Rise of the Movie Theme Song'.

<sup>15</sup> Rick Altman, 'Cinema and Popular Song: The Lost Tradition', in Pamela Robertson Wojcik and Arthur Knight (eds.) *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 26.

<sup>16</sup> Phillip Drummond, *High Noon* (London: BFI, 1997), p. 63.

<sup>17</sup> Palmer, *The Composer in Hollywood*, p. 142.

<sup>18</sup> For details on Ritter's self-conscious adoption of a cowboy image, see Richard Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, pp. 89-90 and Stanfield, *Horse Opera*, p. 111.

<sup>19</sup> See Smith, *The Sounds of Commerce*, pp. 59-60, Drummond, *High Noon*, p. 40, Allison, "Do Not Forsake Me: The Ballad of High Noon' and the Rise of the Movie Theme Song', Altman, 'Cinema and Popular Song: The Lost Tradition', p. 28, Stephen Handzo, 'The Golden Age of Film Music', *Cineaste*

---

21, 1 / 2 (1995) p. 52 and Ronald Rodman, 'The Popular Song as Leitmotif in 1990s Film' in Phil Powrie and Robynn Stilwell (eds.), *Changing Tunes: The Use of Pre-existing Music in Film* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 122-123.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, p. 88.

<sup>21</sup> Stanfield, *Horse Opera*, p. 154.

<sup>22</sup> Tom Lehrer, from the preamble to the song 'Oedipus Rex', on the album *An Evening Wasted With Tom Lehrer* (Decca, 1959).

<sup>23</sup> Drummond, *High Noon*, p. 60 and p. 63.

<sup>24</sup> Allison, "Do Not Forsake Me: The Ballad of High Noon' and the Rise of the Movie Theme Song'.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> See Chapter 3, pp. 224-228.

<sup>27</sup> Drummond, *High Noon*, p. 52.

<sup>28</sup> See my Introduction to Melancholy, p. 68.

<sup>29</sup> See ibid., p. 19, p. 65, pp. 72-73 and p. 82, Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties* (London: Pluto Press, 1983), p. 48, Kim Newman, *Wild West Movies*, p. 148 and Robin Wood, *Rio Bravo*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>30</sup> Robin Wood, 'Rancho Notorious: A Noir Western in Colour', p. 85.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>32</sup> Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 166.

<sup>33</sup> Natalia Ursul, 'Nonsense in Poetry and Prose', *Intertext* 1 / 2 (2008) p. 149.

<sup>34</sup> Kathryn Kalinak, *How the West Was Sung: Music in the Westerns of John Ford* (Berkeley / Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), p. 115.

<sup>35</sup> Tag Gallagher, *John Ford: the man and his films*, p. 263.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 264.

<sup>39</sup> Perez, *The Material Ghost*, p. 10.

<sup>40</sup> Gallagher, *John Ford: the man and his films*, p. 269.

<sup>41</sup> Allison, "Do Not Forsake Me: The Ballad of High Noon' and the Rise of the Movie Theme Song'.

<sup>42</sup> Wood, 'Rancho Notorious: A Noir Western in Colour'

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 88 and Jacobowitz, 'The Dietrich Westerns: *Destry Rides Again* and *Rancho Notorious*', p. 93.

<sup>45</sup> Wood, 'Rancho Notorious: A Noir Western in Colour', p. 90.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

- 
- <sup>50</sup> Jacobowitz, 'The Dietrich Westerns: *Destry Rides Again* and *Rancho Notorious*', p. 93.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 97.
- <sup>52</sup> See my Introduction to *Melancholy*, pp. 76-77.
- <sup>53</sup> Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, p. 58.
- <sup>54</sup> V.F. Perkins, 'Johnny Guitar', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western*, p. 221.
- <sup>55</sup> James Harvey, *Movie Love in the Fifties* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), p. 318.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 313.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 312 and p. 321.
- <sup>58</sup> Perkins, 'Johnny Guitar', p. 221.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 221.
- <sup>60</sup> Harvey, *Movie Love in the Fifties*, p. 319.
- <sup>61</sup> Perkins, 'Johnny Guitar', p. 224.
- <sup>62</sup> V.F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies*, originally published 1972, version cited (Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press, 1993), p. 91.
- <sup>63</sup> Harvey, *Movie Love in the Fifties*, p. 312.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 325.
- <sup>65</sup> Perkins, 'Johnny Guitar', p. 227.
- <sup>66</sup> Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), p. 106.
- <sup>67</sup> Perkins, 'Johnny Guitar', p. 226.
- <sup>68</sup> Harvey, *Movie Love in the Fifties*, p. 326.
- <sup>69</sup> 'Why Preminger?' *Movie 2* (September 1962), p. 11.
- <sup>70</sup> Harlan Kennedy, 'Mitchum', *Film Comment* 28:4 (July 1992), p. 34.
- <sup>71</sup> Perkins, *Film as Film*, p. 93.
- <sup>72</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 152.
- <sup>73</sup> V.F. Perkins, 'River of No Return', *Movie 2* (September 1962), p. 19.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 18.
- <sup>75</sup> Perkins, *Film as Film*, p. 129.
- <sup>76</sup> Richard McGuinness, 'River of No Return', *Film Comment* 8:3 (September / October 1972), p. 65.
- <sup>77</sup> See my Review of Literature, pp. 52-53 and Chapter 1, pp. 145-147.
- <sup>78</sup> Chris Fujiwara, '4 x Otto Preminger', *Film International* 9 (2004), p. 55.
- <sup>79</sup> Perkins, 'River of No Return', p. 19.
- <sup>80</sup> McGuinness, 'River of No Return', p. 65.
- <sup>81</sup> Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 20.

## Conclusion

In order to reflect back on the generic conditions that enabled the different expressions of melancholy in Westerns that I have observed, I would like to juxtapose them with a more recent example. This example relates directly to the last chapter of this thesis – *Appaloosa* (Ed Harris, New Line Cinema, USA, 2008), for me the most satisfying of the small number of Westerns released in recent years, pays tribute to 1950s Western title songs. It offers us a song of its own, called ‘You’ll Never Leave My Heart’, written by Jeff Beal, the composer of the film’s score, and Ed Harris, its director and star, who also sings the song. It is in a broadly Country and Western style, with an arrangement based around guitars and fiddle. During its verses, the minor key tonality and the distinctive meter of the lyrics recall the famous cowboy song ‘(Ghost) Riders in the Sky’. The low vocal register in which Harris sings suggests affinities with Country singers like Johnny Cash, but also with the male singers of the title songs that I looked at. It is not quite the “hard and massive male sound”<sup>1</sup> that Perkins associates with Tex Ritter and Tennessee Ernie Ford, but there is some resemblance.

The lyrics also contain a number of similarities to those of earlier Western theme songs. Like ‘High Noon’ and ‘Johnny Guitar’, ‘You’ll Never Leave My Heart’ explicitly assumes the perspective of its film’s main character – in this case, Virgil Cole (Harris), marshal of the town of Appaloosa. As with both of these songs again, the lyrics address the character’s beloved in the second person and express a combination of devotion and despair. The character at

whom 'You'll Never Leave My Heart' is directed is Allie French (Renée Zellweger), who enters into a romantic relationship with Virgil during the movie, but is unfaithful to him several times. The repeated lines that form the song's chorus are:

And when the day does come when you and I depart,  
You'll be the one who's leaving 'cause you'll never leave my heart.

This refrain reflects a melancholy of a similar type to that expressed in 'Johnny Guitar' ("Whether you go, whether you stay, I love you"), in which the singer / character insists on the value and intensity of their love, despite the prospect of abandonment. The decision to structure the chorus around this prospect is another parallel to 'High Noon', with its lyrics that continually return to the same urgent plea for Amy Kane not to "forsake" her husband. In contrast to either of these songs, however, the end of the relationship is portrayed as inevitable – the chorus asserts that Allie is bound to leave Virgil eventually. This brings an additional element of melancholy to the song's expressions of devotion – they are made in the face of the knowledge that they are not fully reciprocated. There is a melancholy sense of time at work here, too – the permanence of Virgil's affection is juxtaposed with his resignation to the transitory nature of the relationship. It is possible to identify a degree of comfort in this, comparable to the perversely reassuring fatalism expressed in 'River of No Return'. In a number of ways, then, 'You'll Never Leave My Heart' invites comparisons to the theme songs of earlier Westerns and the types of melancholy they were used to express.



However, the song occupies a very different place in its film. It does not form a part of the main score to *Appaloosa* – Beal does not employ its melody as a theme or a *leitmotif*, or allude to it at any point in the movie. The song, either in vocal or instrumental form, is not used to introduce, narrate or contextualise any of the action we see. We only hear Harris sing it about 3 ½ minutes after the narrative portion of the film has finished, a good way into the end credits, while various post-production personnel are being acknowledged onscreen. Thus, its role in the film is a marginal one – it is offered as a postscript or an appendix, a surprise bonus for the minority of the audience that has not yet left the cinema or stopped the DVD. In this context, the song's recollection of a previous era of Western movie music seems like a cross between a homage and a joke. The lyrics suggest both through their combination of deliberately antiquated language – what has been called “the familiar archaisms of Western speech”<sup>2</sup> – and ribald references to Allie's infidelity (which would not have been permitted under earlier conditions of censorship):

Every cheatin' bastard who takes you to his bed  
 'Il wish he'd kept his britches on when he's lying full of lead.

Whether it is understood as a tribute to songs like ‘High Noon’, or a parody of them, its significance to the film itself is marginal. Either interpretation requires an awareness of the background that the song is drawing on. This is not something that the film wants to rely too heavily on, at a time when the days in which Westerns frequently featured title songs seem increasingly distant and obscure. Thus, the song is safely tucked away in the credits where it can be appreciated by those who are interested in doing so (perhaps the assumption is that only the more committed film buffs will still be watching)

without impinging on the main body of the movie. And it is hard to imagine how the song could work if it were featured more prominently. It would raise too many questions about its place in the world of the film, and why exactly Virgil's feelings for Allie were being expressed in so direct and yet so stylised a way.

The melancholy in the song is expressed in a very different context from that which produced the melancholy elements that I have examined in this thesis. We might think of this difference in terms of expectations. Today, the expectations for what a Western can contain are considerably more rarefied than they were during the period of filmmaking that I have looked at. This is clearly demonstrated by the extent that 'You'll Never Leave My Heart' has to be kept separate from the rest of its movie. It would be very difficult to accommodate a song that articulates aspects of its film's narrative in such an overt and detailed fashion within contemporary expectations of the Western genre. As I have argued elsewhere, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Westerns do not really have a "current generic mainstream"<sup>3</sup> to relate themselves to – there are few clear norms against which to judge deviations. Thus, they must find their own ways to account for any unusual or distinctive elements. *High Noon* and *Rancho Notorious* used narrating songs in a novel and innovative fashion, but did so at a time when many more Westerns were being made and there was a more immediate sense of the variety within the genre. The popular understanding of the possibilities for the relationship between music and Westerns was broader – Western styles and themes were more widely used in popular

music, and as Stanfield points out, singing cowboy movies were still being produced as late as 1956<sup>4</sup>.

The instances of melancholy in Westerns that I have discussed in this thesis rely on a more developed sense of the conventions and expectations of the genre than now exists in the mainstream. We can perceive them as melancholy because of the ways in which they subvert these expectations, or fulfil them in ways which have further melancholy implications. As Buscombe argues, "In such an elaborately coded universe any departure from the norm is likely to be significant."<sup>5</sup> The representations of violence that I looked at in Chapter 1, for example, are understood as melancholy in relation to the perceived standards governing the forms, styles and functions of violence in Westerns. Thus, the melancholy inflection of the conventions of the gunfight in a film like *Man With The Gun* depends on our awareness of the values that these conventions would usually imply. Similarly, the melancholy tropes that I looked at in Chapters 2 and 3 derive their significance from their relationship to wider expectations within the genre. The sense of restricted possibilities that is conveyed in different ways by both the setting of the night-time town and the figure of the old man is understood as such because we can compare it to the more expansive possibilities implied in other parts of the generic world. I demonstrated this in my discussion of the different spaces in *Stagecoach*, and in my comparison of old men and Western heroes in terms of stasis and mobility.

Expressions of melancholy are often at their most effective in this sort of context, where they can be seen as providing a contrasting or alternative viewpoint. The traditional association of melancholy with insight and sensitivity makes it particularly suitable for suggesting a different side to something familiar, some unusual aspect that may have been ignored or overlooked. The highly overt and elaborated conventions of the Western genre at its popular peak provided rich opportunities for melancholy elements to function in this way, to reinterpret these conventions and develop them in different directions, playing off the expectations of the audience. The context in which such a complex engagement with the genre by both filmmakers and audiences was possible has now largely been lost.

But I do not want to end by getting, as it were, melancholy about melancholy. Instead, I would like to suggest that the ways in which perceptions and understandings of the Western genre have changed since it fell out of popular favour merit further detailed investigation. Its various conventional images, themes and connotations have not simply disappeared over the decades since Hollywood stopped regularly producing Westerns. The genre, in its time, was too significant a cultural presence for this to be possible. Instead, these elements can be found scattered across the many different areas of popular culture in which the influence of Westerns can still be felt. As Buscombe observes, "The Western myth has overflowed its origins in visual and written narrative and fertilised popular music, fashion, children's toys, advertising, and even our everyday speech."<sup>6</sup> The ways in which Western tropes operate in these and other contexts – the meanings they bring with

them and the new ones that they acquire – still need to be examined in detail. The continued use of Western conventions and associations in other popular Hollywood genres (action and science fiction immediately spring to mind) should also be incorporated into such a discussion. I would like my future research into Westerns to address these issues, to focus on what we might call the afterlife of the genre in a variety of popular media. I do not know if this will once again bring me into contact with melancholy in one form or another, but it will certainly complement my existing research. The central concerns of this thesis emerged out of looking at the past from the perspective of the present. I hope to take my examination of the genre still further by looking at the present from the perspective of the past.

---

<sup>1</sup> Perkins, 'Johnny Guitar', p. 221.

<sup>2</sup> Mike Dibb, 'A Time and a Place: Budd Boetticher and the Western', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western*, p. 163.

<sup>3</sup> Falconer, '3:10 again: a remade Western and the problem of authenticity', p. 62.

<sup>4</sup> Stanfield, *Horse Opera*, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Buscombe, 'The Western: A Short History', p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

### Bibliography

Allison, Deborah, "'Do Not Forsake Me: The Ballad of High Noon" and the Rise of the Movie Theme Song', *Senses of Cinema* (2003),  
[http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/28/ballad\\_of\\_high\\_noon.html](http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/28/ballad_of_high_noon.html),  
 accessed April 2009.

Altman, Rick, 'Cinema and Popular Song: The Lost Tradition', in Wojcik and Knight (eds.) *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music*, pp. 19-30.

Arendt, Hannah, *On Violence* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970).

Barr, Charles, 'Dodge City', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western*, pp.181-188.

Baudelaire, Charles, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (London: Phaidon, 1995).

Baudelaire, Charles, 'Chant d'automne' and 'Spleen', originally published in *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857). Versions cited published online at  
<http://fleursdumal.org/poem/208> ('Chant d'automne') and  
<http://fleursdumal.org/poem/161> ('Spleen'), accessed March 2009.

Baudelaire, Charles, 'The Painter of Modern Life', originally published 1863, version cited in Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, pp. 1-41.

Bazin, André, *What is Cinema? Volume 2*, translated by Hugh Gray (Berkeley / Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).

Bazin, André, 'The Evolution of the Western', originally published 1955, version cited in Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume 2*, pp. 149-157.

Benjamin, Walter, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, originally published 1928, version cited (London: Verso, 1998).

'Best "Ghost Town" Titles', *The Internet Movie Database*, <http://uk.imdb.com/keyword/ghost-town/>, accessed September 2010.

Biskind, Peter, *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties* (London: Pluto Press, 1983).

Bliss, Michael, *Justified Lives: Morality and Narrative in the Films of Sam Peckinpah* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993).

Bordwell, David, Staiger, Janet and Thompson, Kristin, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1988).

Breitenberg, Mark, *Anxious masculinity in early modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Britton, Andrew, 'Pursued – A reply to Paul Willemen', *Framework* 4, Summer 1976, pp. 4-14.

Burton, Robert, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, originally published 1621, version cited (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001).

Buscombe, Edward (ed.), *The BFI Companion to the Western* (London: BFI, 1993).

Buscombe, Edward, *Stagecoach* (London: British Film Institute, 1992).

Buscombe, Edward, 'Appendix I: Charts and Tables', in Buscombe (ed.), *The BFI Companion to the Western*, pp. 425-428.

Buscombe, Edward, 'Ghost town', in Buscombe (ed.), *The BFI Companion to the Western*, p. 129.

Buscombe, Edward, 'Inventing Monument Valley: Nineteenth Century Landscape Photography and the Western Film', in Kitses and Rickman (eds.), *The Western Reader*, pp. 115-130.

Buscombe, Edward, 'Old-timer', in Buscombe (ed.), *The BFI Companion to the Western*, p. 197.

Buscombe, Edward, 'The Western: A Short History', in Buscombe (ed.), *The BFI Companion to the Western*, pp. 15-54.

Buscombe, Edward and Pearson, Roberta E. (eds.), *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western* (London: BFI, 1998).

Cameron, Ian (ed.), *The Movie Book of Film Noir* (London: Studio Vista, 1992).

Cameron, Ian, 'Foreword', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of The Western*, p. 7.

Cameron, Ian and Pye, Douglas (eds.), *The Movie Book of The Western* (London: Studio Vista, 1996).

Carroll, Rachel (ed.), *Adaptation in Contemporary Culture* (London: Continuum, 2009).

Cavell, Stanley, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Scepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

Cavell, Stanley, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

Cavell, Stanley, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the ontology of film* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

Cavell, Stanley, 'Being Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe)', in Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Scepticism and Romanticism*, pp. 105-130.

Cawelti, John G., *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971).



Clarke, Donald, *The Rise and Fall of Popular Music* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995).

Clover, Carol, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992).

Corkin, Stanley, *Cowboys as Cold Warriors: the Western and US History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).

Cooper, James Fenimore, *The Pioneers*, originally published 1823, version cited (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988).

Coyne, Michael, *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997).

Dibb, Mike, 'A Time and a Place: Budd Boetticher and the Western', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western*, pp. 161-166.

Phillip Drummond, *High Noon* (London: BFI, 1997).

Falconer, Pete, '3:10 again: a remade Western and the problem of authenticity' in Carroll (ed.), *Adaptation in Contemporary Culture*, pp. 61-71.

Fairlamb, Brian, "One in a Thousand": Western Stars, Heroes and their Guns', *CineAction* 46 (June 1998), pp. 18-25.

Fraser, John, *Violence in the Arts* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

French, Philip, *Westerns: Aspects of a Movie Genre and Westerns Revisited* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005).

Freud, Sigmund, 'Mourning and Melancholia', originally published 1919, version cited in Radden (ed.), *The Nature of Melancholy*, pp. 283-294.

Fujiwara, Chris, '4 x Otto Preminger', *Film International* 9 (2004), pp. 54-56.

Gaines, Jane Marie and Herzog, Charlotte Cornelia, 'The Fantasy of Authenticity in Western Costume', in Buscombe and Pearson (eds.), *Back in the Saddle Again*, pp. 172-181.

Gallafent, Edward, *Quentin Tarantino* (Harlow: Pearson, 2006).

Gallagher, Tag, *John Ford: the man and his films* (Berkeley / Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).

Gallagher, Tag, 'Shoot-Out at the Genre Corral: Problems in the "Evolution" of the Western', in Grant (ed.), *Film Genre Reader*, pp. 262-276.

Gellert, Bridget, 'The Iconography of Melancholy in the Graveyard Scene of *Hamlet*', *Studies in Philology* 67: 1 (January 1970), pp. 57-66.

Gibbs, John and Pye, Douglas (eds.), *Style and meaning: studies in the detailed analysis of film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

Gorbman, Claudia, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (London: BFI, 1987).

Grant, Barry Keith (ed.), *Film Genre Reader* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

Greenblatt, Stephen, (ed.), *The Norton Shakespeare* (London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997).

Grimsley, Ronald, 'Romantic Melancholy in Chateaubriand and Kierkegaard', *Comparative Literature* 8:3 (Summer 1956).

Gunning, Tom, 'Film History and Film Analysis: The Individual Film in the Course of Time', *Wide Angle* 12:3 (July 1990), pp. 4-19.

Handzo, Stephen, 'The Golden Age of Film Music', *Cineaste* 21: 1-2 (1995), pp. 46-55.

Harvey, James, *Movie Love in the Fifties* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001).

Hoberman, J. 'How the Western Was Lost', originally published 1991, version cited in Kitses and Rickman (eds.), *The Western Reader*, pp. 85-92.

Hoskyns, Barney, *Hotel California: singer-songwriters and cocaine cowboys in the LA canyons, 1967-1976* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006).

Jacobowitz, Florence, 'The Dietrich Westerns: *Destry Rides Again* and *Rancho Notorious*', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western*, pp. 88-98.

Janowitz, Anne, *England's Ruins: Poetic Purpose and the National Landscape* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

Kalinak, Kathryn, *How the West Was Sung: Music in the Westerns of John Ford* (Berkeley / Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).

Kennedy, Harlan, Mitchum', *Film Comment* 28:4 (July 1992), pp. 30-35.

Kitses, Jim, *Horizons West: Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, Sam Peckinpah: studies of Authorship within the Western* (London: BFI / Thames and Hudson, 1969).

Kitses, Jim, *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood* (London: BFI, 2004).

Kitses, Jim, 'Introduction: Post-modernism and The Western', in Kitses and Rickman (eds.) *The Western Reader*, pp. 15-31.

Kitses, Jim and Rickman, Gregg (eds.), *The Western Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998).

Kitzes, Adam H., *The Politics of Melancholy from Spenser to Milton* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

Klibansky, Raymond, Panofsky, Erwin and Saxl, Fritz, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art* (London: Nelson, 1964).

Kracauer, Siegfried, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960).

Langford, Barry, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

Leutrat, Jean-Louis and Liandrat-Guigues, Suzanne, 'John Ford and Monument Valley', in Buscombe and Pearson (eds.), *Back in the Saddle Again*, pp. 160-169.

Lusted, David, *The Western* (Harlow: Pearson / Longman, 2003).

Lusted, David, 'Social class and the Western as male melodrama' in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western*, pp. 63-74.

McGuinness, Richard, 'River of No Return', *Film Comment* 8:3 (September / October 1972), pp. 62-65.

McVeigh, Stephen, *The American Western* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

Mulvey, Laura, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16:3 (Autumn 1975), pp. 6-18.

Nachbar, Jack G., 'Introduction: A Century on the Trail', *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 30:4 (Winter 2003), pp. 178-180.

Neale, Steve, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Newman, *Wild West Movies, or How The West Was Found, Won, Lost, Lied About, Filmed and Forgotten* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990).

Nicholls, Mark, 'Male Melancholia and Martin Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence*, *Film Comment* 58:1 (Autumn 2004), pp. 25-35.

Nott, Robert, *Last of the Cowboy Heroes: The Westerns of Randolph Scott, Joel McCrea and Audie Murphy* (London: McFarland and Company, 2000).

Palmer, Christopher, *The Composer in Hollywood* (London: Marion Boyars, 1990).

Peek, Wendy Chapman, 'The Romance of Competence: Rethinking Masculinity in the Western', *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 30:4 (Winter 2003), pp. 206-219.

Perkins, V.F., *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies*, originally published 1972, version cited (Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press, 1993).

Perkins, V.F., 'Johnny Guitar', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western*, pp. 221-228.

Perkins, V.F., 'River of No Return', *Movie* 2 (September 1962), pp. 18-19.

Perkins, V.F., 'Where is the world? The horizon of events in movie fiction', in Gibbs and Pye (eds.), *Style and meaning*, pp. 16-31.

Perez, Gilberto, *The Material Ghost: Films and their medium* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

Peterson, Richard A., *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

Powrie, Phil and Stilwell, Robynn (eds.), *Changing Tunes: The Use of Pre-existing Music Film* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

Prince, Stephen, *Classical Film Violence: Designing and Regulating Brutality in Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1968* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

Prince, Stephen, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (London: Athlone, 1998).

Pumphrey, Martin, 'Why Do Cowboys Wear Hats in the Bath? Style Politics for the Older Man', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western*, pp. 50-62.

Pye, Douglas, 'The Collapse of Fantasy: Masculinity in the Westerns of Anthony Mann', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western*, pp. 167-173.

Pye, 'Genre and History: *Fort Apache* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*' in Cameron and Pye (eds.) *The Movie Book of the Western*, pp. 111-122.

Pye, Douglas, 'Introduction: Criticism and the Western', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of The Western*, pp. 9-21.

Pye, Douglas, 'Movies and Point Of View', *Movie 36* (2000), pp. 2-34.

Radden, Jennifer, 'Introduction: From Melancholic States to Clinical Depression' in Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy*, pp. 3-51.

Radden, Jennifer (ed.), *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Robertson, Pamela, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996).

Rodman, Ronald, 'The Popular Song as Leitmotif in 1990s Film', in Powrie and Stilwell (eds.), *Changing Tunes*, pp. 119-136.

Rothman, William and Keane, Marian, *Reading Cavell's The World Viewed: A Philosophical Perspective on Film* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000).

Schor, Naomi, 'One Hundred Years of Melancholy: The Zaharoff Lecture for 1996' (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Seydor, Paul, *Peckinpah: The Western Films* (Urbana / Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980).

Shakespeare, William, *As You Like It*, originally published c. 1600, version cited in Greenblatt (ed.), *The Norton Shakespeare*, pp. 1591-1657.

Simmon, Scott, *The Invention of the Western Film: A Cultural History of the Genre's First Half-Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Slotkin, Richard, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992).

Slotkin, Richard, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier. 1600-1860* (Middletown CT, Wesleyan University Press, 1973).

Smith, Henry Nash, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1950).

Smith, Jeff, *The Sounds of Commerce: Marketing Popular Film Music* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

Sontag, Susan, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979).

Stanfield, Peter, 'Country music and the 1939 Western: from Hillbillies to Cowboys', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western*, pp. 22-33.

Stanfield, Peter, *Horse Opera: The Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy* (Urbana / Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

Sullivan, Erin, 'The art of medicine: Melancholy, medicine and the arts', *The Lancet*, Vol. 372 (September 13, 2008), pp. 884-885.

Tasker, Yvonne, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, genre and the action cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993).

Thomas, Deborah, *Beyond Genre: Melodrama, Comedy and Romance in Hollywood Films* (Moffat: Cameron and Hollis, 2000).

Thomas, Deborah, 'John Wayne's Body', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western*, pp. 75-87.

Thomas, Tony, *Film Score: The View from the Podium* (South Brunswick and New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1979).

Thomson, David, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film, Fourth Edition* (London, Little, Brown, 2003).

Tompkins, Jane, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

Ursul, Natalia, 'Nonsense in Poetry and Prose', *Intertext 1 / 2* (2008), pp. 146-152.

Vallance, Tom, 'Obituary: Bobs Watson', *The Independent*, 7<sup>th</sup> July 1999, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-bobs-watson-1104741.html>, accessed July 2010.

Walker, Michael, 'Film Noir: Introduction', in Cameron (ed.), *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, pp. 8-38.

Walker, Michael, 'The Westerns of Delmer Daves', in Cameron and Pye (eds.), *The Movie Book of the Western*, pp. 123-160.

Warshow, Robert, *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre and other aspects of Popular Culture*, originally published 1962, version cited (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).



Warshow, Robert, 'Author's Preface', in Warshow, *The Immediate Experience*, pp. xxxvii-xliii.

Warshow, Robert, 'The Gangster as Tragic Hero', originally published 1948, version cited in Warshow, *The Immediate Experience*, pp. 97-103.

Warshow, Robert, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', originally published 1954, version cited in Warshow, *The Immediate Experience*, pp. 105-124.

White, Hayden, 'Response: The Dark Side of Art History', *Art Bulletin*, 89:1 (March 2007), pp. 21-26.

'Why Preminger?' *Movie 2* (September 1962).

Wojcik, Pamela Robertson and Knight, Arthur, (eds.) *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

Wollen, Peter (as Lee Russell), 'Budd Boetticher', originally published 1965, version cited in Kitses and Rickman, *The Western Reader*, pp. 195-200.

Wood, Robin, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (London / New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

Wood, Robin, *Howard Hawks* (London: BFI, 1968).

Wood, Robin, *Rio Bravo* (London: BFI, 2003).

Wood, Robin, 'Man(n) of the West(ern)', *CineAction* 46 (June 1998), pp. 26-33.

Wood, Robin, 'Rancho Notorious: A Noir Western in Colour', *CineAction!* 12 / 13 (August 1988), pp. 83-93.

Wright, Will, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley / Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975).

Wyatt-Brown, Bertram, *Southern Honour: Ethics and Behaviour in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

### Filmography

*All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, Universal, USA, 1955).

*Anatomy of a Murder* (Otto Preminger, Carlyle Productions, USA, 1959).

*Appaloosa* (Ed Harris, New Line Cinema, USA, 2008).

*Bend of the River* (Anthony Mann, Universal, USA, 1952).

*The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, The Samuel Goldwyn Company, USA, 1946).

*The Big Country* (William Wyler, Anthony Productions / Worldwide Productions, USA, 1958).

*Blood on the Moon* (Robert Wise, RKO, USA, 1948).

*Colorado Territory* (Raoul Walsh, Warner Brothers, USA, 1949).

*Colt .45* (Edwin L. Marin, Warner Brothers, USA, 1950).

*Crossfire* (Edward Dmytryk, RKO, USA, 1947).

*Destry Rides Again* (George Marshall, Universal, USA, 1939).

*Devil's Doorway* (Anthony Mann, MGM, USA, 1950).

*Django* (Sergio Corbucci, B.R.C. Produzione S.r.l., Italy, 1966).

*Dodge City* (Michael Curtiz, Warner Brothers, USA, 1939).

*Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, Vanguard Films, USA, 1946).

*The Gunfighter* (Henry King, Twentieth Century-Fox, USA, 1950).

*High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, Stanley Kramer Productions, USA, 1952).

*It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, Liberty Films, USA, 1946).

*Jesse James* (Henry King, Twentieth Century-Fox, USA, 1939).

*Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, Republic Pictures, USA, 1954).

*Man of the West* (Anthony Mann, Ashton Productions, USA, 1958).

*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, Paramount, USA, 1962).

*Man With The Gun* (Richard Wilson, Formosa Productions, USA, 1955).

*Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, Warner Brothers, USA, 1945).

*My Darling Clementine* (John Ford, Twentieth Century-Fox, USA, 1946).

*The Ox-Bow Incident* (William Wellman, Twentieth Century-Fox, USA, 1943).

*Penny Serenade* (George Stevens, Columbia, USA, 1941).

*Pursued* (Raoul Walsh, United States Pictures / Warner Brothers, USA, 1947).

*Rage at Dawn* (Tim Whelan, RKO, USA, 1955).

*Rancho Notorious* (Fritz Lang, Fidelity Pictures, USA, 1952).

*Red Sundown* (Jack Arnold, Universal, USA, 1956).

*The Return of Frank James* (Fritz Lang, Twentieth Century-Fox, USA, 1940).

*Ride Lonesome* (Budd Boetticher, Columbia / Ranown, USA, 1959).

*Ride the High Country* (Sam Peckinpah, MGM, USA, 1962).

*Rio Bravo* (Howard Hawks, Armada Productions / Warner Brothers, USA, 1959).

*River of No Return* (Otto Preminger, Twentieth Century-Fox, USA, 1954).

*Run of the Arrow* (Samuel Fuller, Globe Enterprises, USA, 1957).

*The Searchers* (John Ford, Warner Brothers / C.V. Whitney, USA 1956).

*Shadow of a Doubt* (Alfred Hitchcock, Universal, USA, 1943).

*Shane* (George Stevens, Paramount, USA, 1953).

*She Wore A Yellow Ribbon* (John Ford, Argosy Pictures, USA, 1949).

*Stagecoach* (John Ford, Walter Wanger Productions, USA, 1939).

*Story of G.I. Joe* (William Wellman, Lester Cowan Productions, USA, 1945).

*Straw Dogs* (Sam Peckinpah, ABC Pictures, USA, 1971).

*Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, Malpaso / Warner Brothers, USA, 1992).

*Wagon Master* (John Ford, Argosy Pictures, USA, 1950).

*A Walk in the Sun* (Lewis Milestone, Lewis Milestone Productions, USA, 1945).

*The Westerner* (William Wyler, The Samuel Goldwyn Company, USA, 1940).

*Winchester '73* (Anthony Mann, Universal, USA, 1950).

*The Wonderful Country* (Robert Parrish, D.R.M. Productions, USA, 1959).

*Yellow Sky* (William Wellman, Twentieth Century-Fox, USA, 1948).

#### Miscellaneous Sources

*An Evening Wasted With Tom Lehrer* (Decca, 1959).

The Upsetters, 'Return of Django' (Trojan, 1969).

*Wagon Train* (NBC, USA, 1957-1962).

Illustrations

Fig. 1.1 – *Colt. 45*: the guns in their display case.

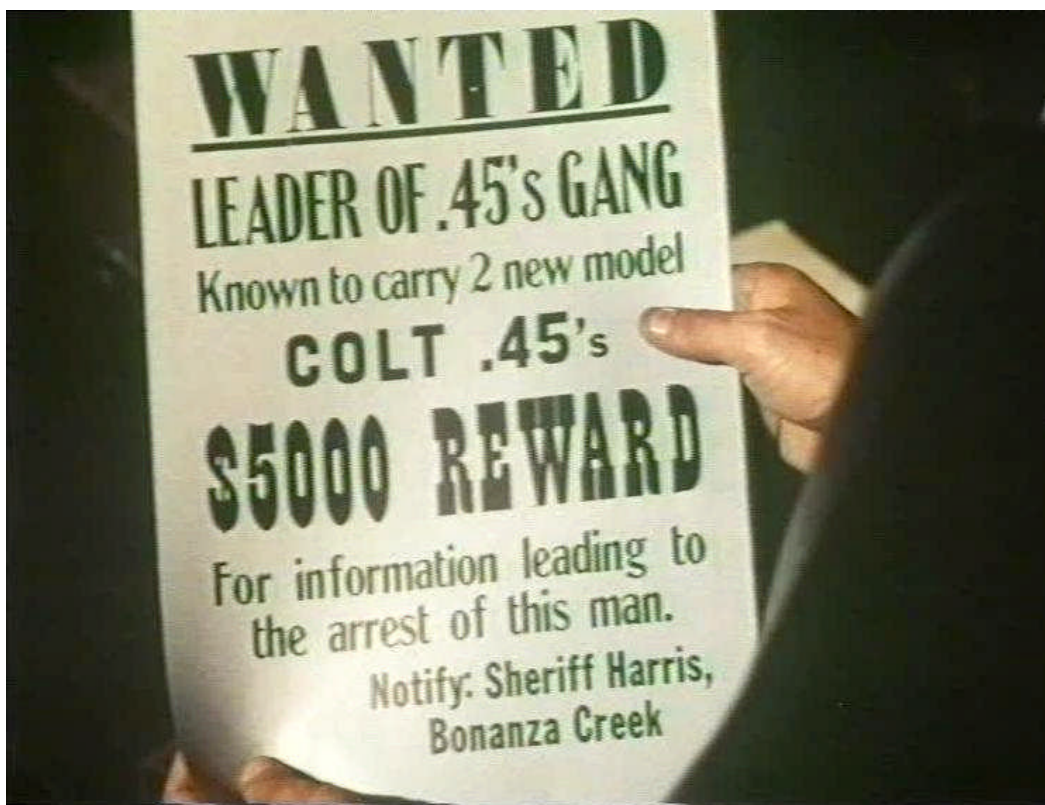


Fig. 1.2 – *Colt. 45*: Brett's wanted poster.





Fig. 1.3 – *The Gunfighter*. Jimmy Ringo shoots Eddie, while still holding his drink in his other hand.



Fig. 1.4 – *Bend of the River*. Laura listening to the calls of the “night-birds”.





Fig. 1.5 – *Winchester '73*: Lola tells Lin that she understands what the last bullet is for.



Fig. 1.6 – *Stagecoach*: Mrs Mallory praying, unaware of Hatfield's gun.



Fig. 1.7 – *Winchester '73*: the scuffed stock of the recovered rifle.



Fig. 1.8 – *Dodge City*: Harry playing at being “a pretty desperate character.”



Fig. 1.9 – *Dodge City*: a glimpse of the Sunday School picnic scene in an earlier montage.



Fig. 1.10 – *The Return of Frank James*: revealing the gun.





Fig. 1.11 – *Destry Rides Again*: Destry reacts to the death of Frenchy.



Fig. 1.12 – *Destry Rides Again*: Destry listens to the children singing.



Fig. 1.13 – *The Return of Frank James*: “Are you ready to meet your maker?”  
“I reckon so.”



Fig. 1.14 – *The Return of Frank James*: Frank looming over the stage.



Fig. 1.15 – *Colt .45*: the oddly static two-shot.



Fig. 1.16 – *Man With The Gun*: Nelly cradles the wounded Tollinger.





Fig. 1.17 – *The Gunfighter*: the silhouetted rider in the final shot.



Fig. 2.1 – *Pursued*: Jeb hiding in the stable.



Fig. 2.2 – *Pursued*: Jeb, still in the shadows after shooting young Prentice.



Fig. 2.3 – *Pursued*: Grant Callum points a gun at Jeb from the alley.





Fig. 2.4 – *Pursued*: Jake Dingle's gun, revealed in the same shot to be pointed at Callum.



Fig. 2.5 – *Rio Bravo*: Dude and Chance looking up the street at Wheeler.



Fig. 2.6 – *Rio Bravo*: Wheeler coming down the street.



Fig. 2.7 – *Rio Bravo*: Wheeler stepping into the sights of the hidden gunman.



Fig. 2.8 – *Rio Bravo*: the hidden gunman up in the rafters of the saloon.

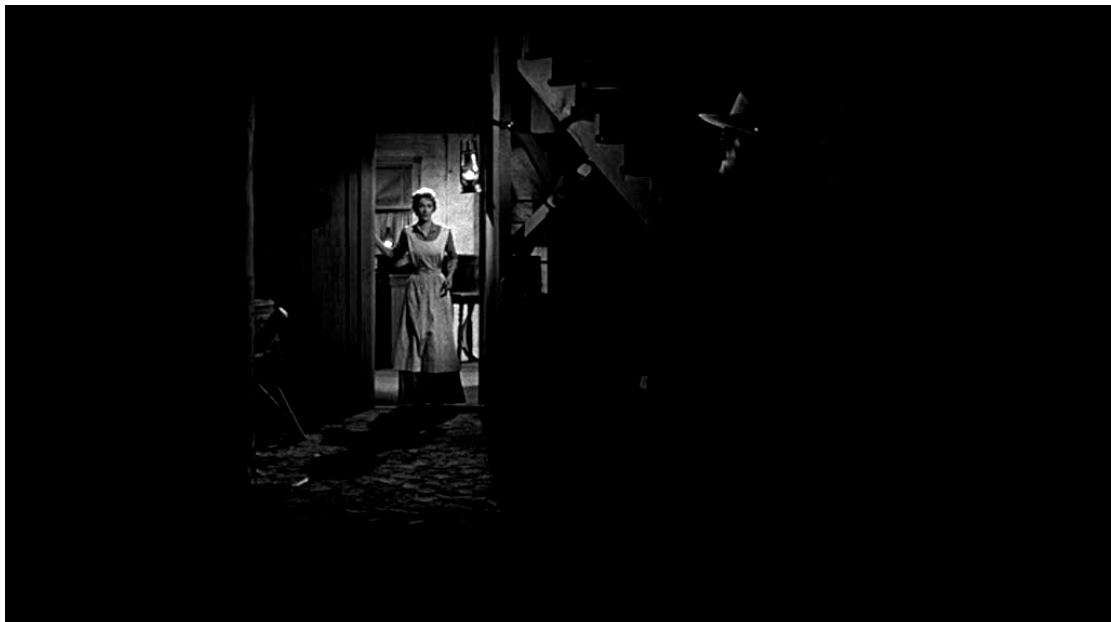


Fig. 2.9 – *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* – Hallie in the kitchen doorway, watching Tom depart.



Fig. 2.10 – *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: Tom shoots Liberty Valance from across the street.



Fig. 2.11 – *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: Ranse peering in through the window of the newspaper office.



Fig. 2.12 – *Stagecoach*: “If there’s ever anything I can do for...”



Fig. 2.13 – *Stagecoach*: “I know.”



Fig. 2.14 – *Stagecoach*: Ringo and the Plummer brothers meet where the street narrows.



Fig. 2.15 – *Stagecoach*: Ringo dives forward and fires.





Fig. 3.1 – *Blood on the Moon*: Kris Barden in a gunfighter pose.



Fig. 3.2 – *Blood on the Moon* – Barden given an iconic outline in a rear-close-up.



Fig. 3.3 – *Blood on the Moon*: introducing Barden's homestead.



Fig. 3.4 – *Blood on the Moon*: Barden reacts to the news of his son's death.





Fig. 3.5 – *Yellow Sky*: the main street of the ghost town.



Fig. 3.6 – *Ride Lonesome*: the main characters in the ruined Dobe Corral.



Fig. 3.7 – *Yellow Sky*: Grandpa offers Stretch a drink.



Fig. 3.8 – *Blood on the Moon*: Barden's house at the end of the movie.





Fig. 3.9 – *Yellow Sky*: Grandpa dozing in the saddle.



Fig. 3.10 – *Man of the West*: Dock Tobin presiding over the fight between Link and Coaley.



Fig. 3.11 – *Man of the West*. Dock up on the ledge, shouting down at Link.



Fig. 3.12 – *Man of the West*. Dock coming down from the mountain.





Fig. 3.13 – *Man of the West*. Link patting Billie on the hand.



Fig. 3.14 – *Man of the West*. Coaley holds a knife to Link's throat while Dock dozes in the background.



Fig. 3.15 – *Ride the High Country*: Gil Westrum as “The Oregon Kid”.



Fig. 3.16 – *Ride the High Country*: Steve Judd in the wilderness.



Fig. 3.17 – *Ride the High Country*: Gil in the wilderness.



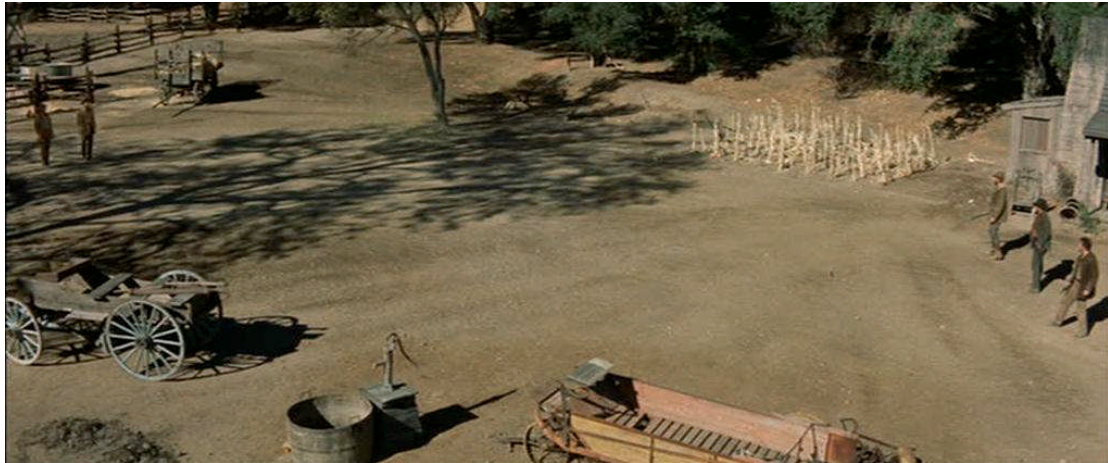


Fig. 3.18 – *Ride the High Country*. the face-off in the Knudsen farmyard.



Fig. 3.19 – *Ride the High Country*. Gil and Steve face the Hammonds.



Fig. 3.20 – *Ride the High Country*. Steve falls out of the frame in the final shot.

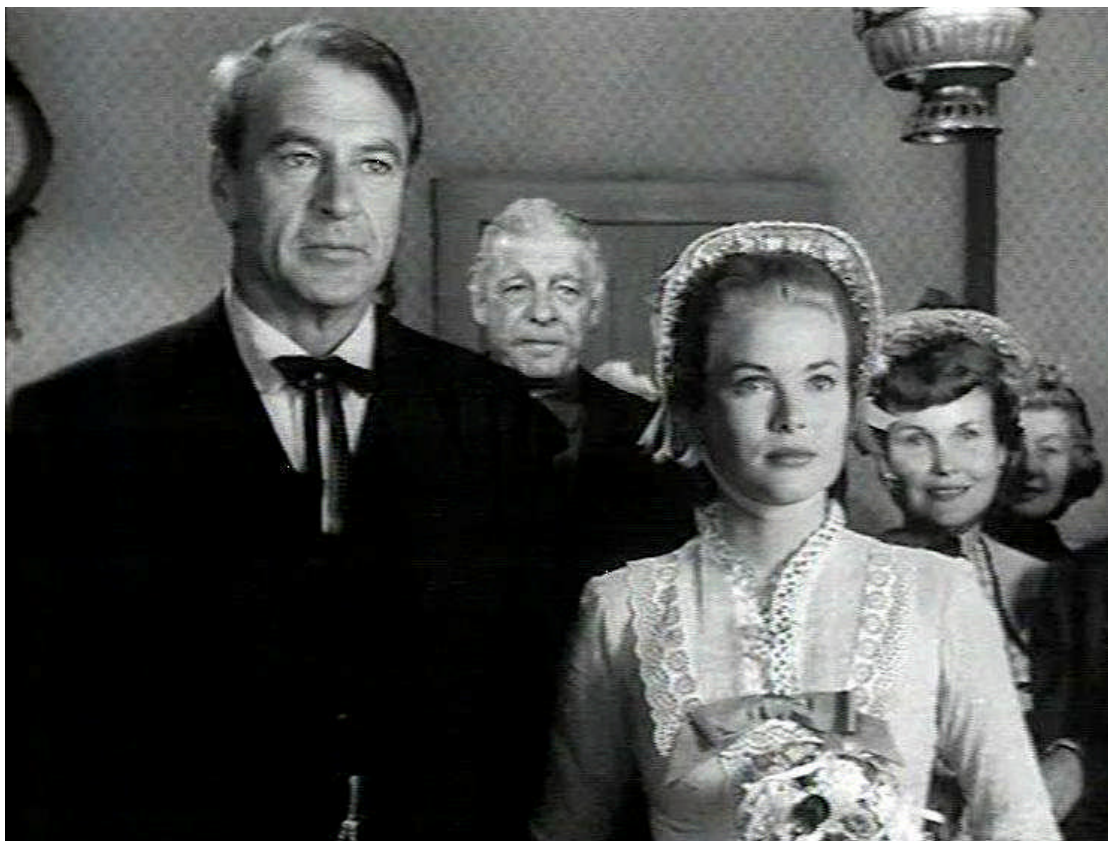


Fig. 4.1 – *High Noon*: Will and Amy Kane step forward to take their wedding vows.



Fig. 4.2 – *High Noon*: “No, I couldn’t get anybody.”





Fig. 4.3 – *High Noon*: the end of the crane shot.



Fig. 4.4 – *Wagon Master*: the river crossing.

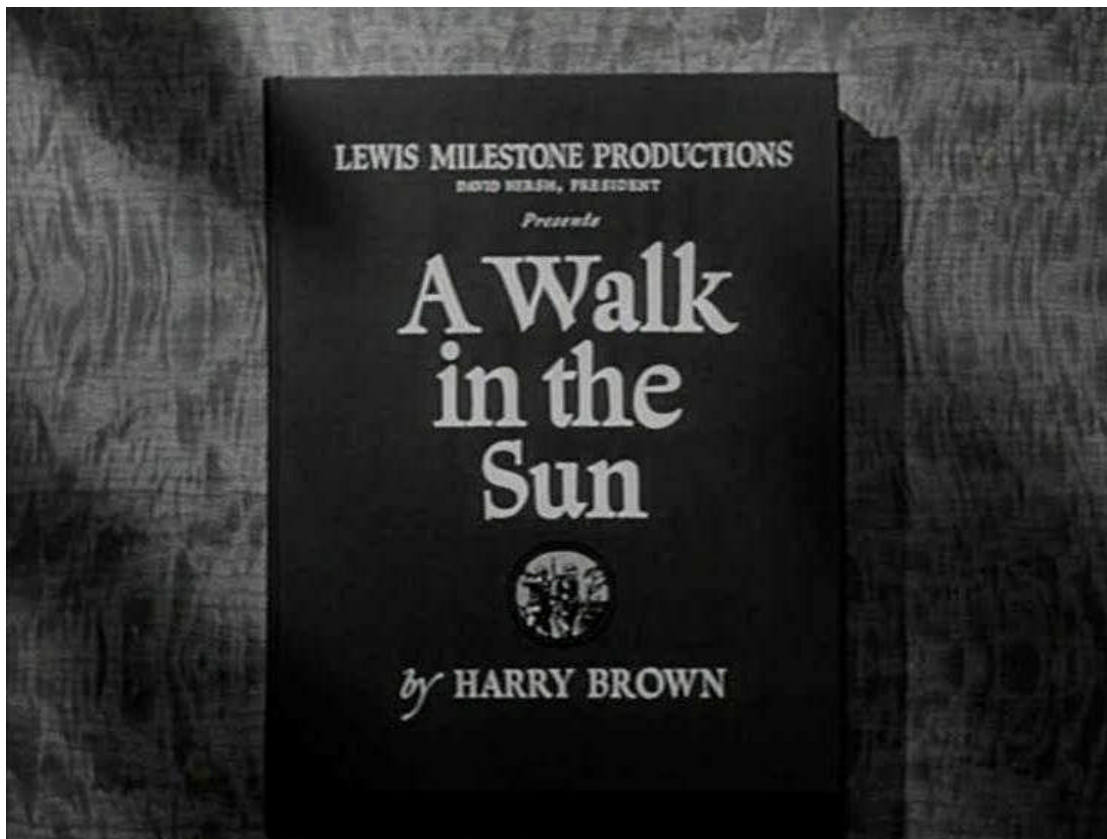


Fig. 4.5 – *A Walk in the Sun*: the book as title card.



Fig. 4.6 – *Rancho Notorious*: Altar Keane singing, smoking and looking bored in a flashback.



Fig. 4.7 – *Rancho Notorious*: the face of an anonymous grizzled frontiersman.



Fig. 4.8 – *Johnny Guitar*: Vienna lighting the lamps.





Fig. 4.9 – *Rancho Notorious*: groups of older men sitting around doing nothing.

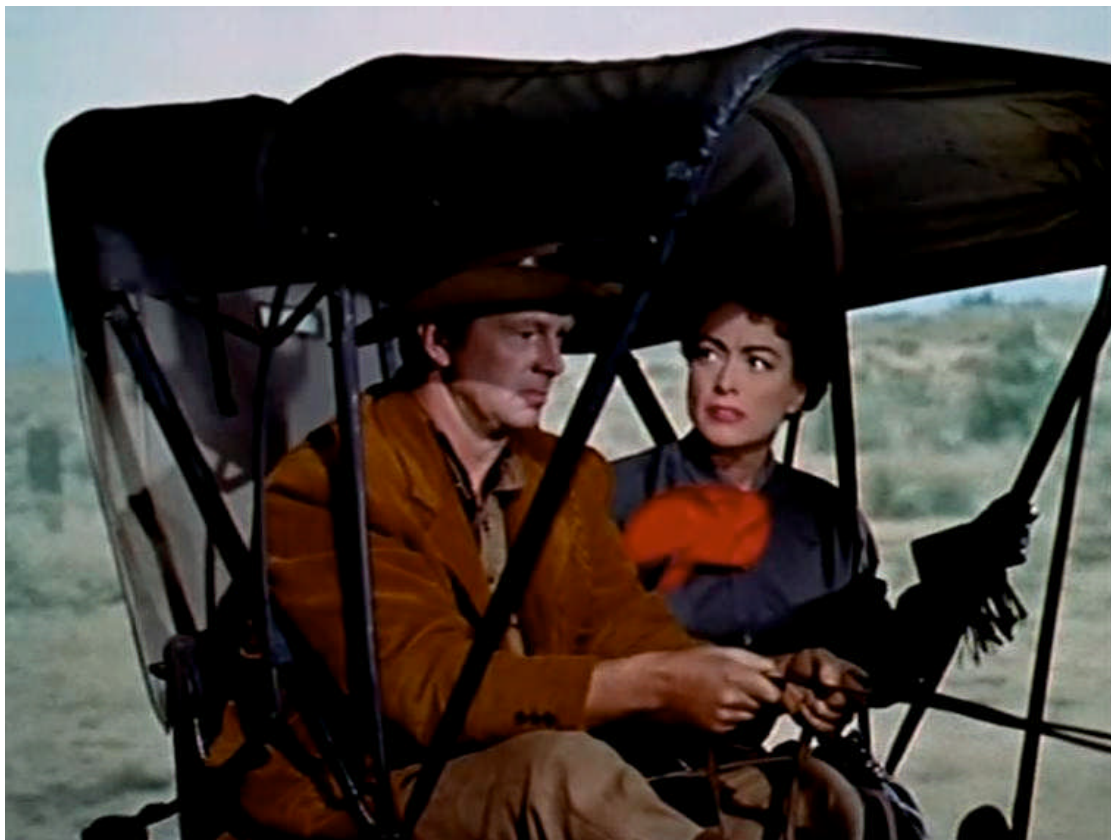


Fig. 4.10 – *Johnny Guitar*: Vienna's fringed leather gloves, worn on the buggy ride with Johnny.



Fig. 4.11 – *River of No Return*: Matt Calder chopping down a tree in the opening shot.



Fig. 4.12 – *River of No Return*: Kay Weston closes her eyes as she sings.